



THE
MERCENARY &
THE
MORTICIAN

ALEXANDRA
ST PIERRE

THE MERCENARY & THE MORTICIAN



ALEXANDRA ST. PIERRE

OceanofPDF.com

Copyright © 2024 by Black Cat Fiction Inc.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer who may quote brief passages in a review.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

This book is a fictional piece of literature and is not a guidebook. Actions performed by characters are dangerous and recreating any activity learned in these books is not recommended.

Cover Illustrations copyright © 2024 by Alexandra St Pierre

Editor: Taylor Chernitsky (@_beauty_and_the_bookworm_)

Character Art: Rhiann Hearons (@rhearons_art)

Playlist Designer: Lauren van Keulen (@promisevideo)

Format/Layout: Brady Moller

ISBN Paperback: 9798303601888

ISBN Hardcover: 9798303602076

[OceanofPDF.com](https://oceanofpdf.com)

CONTENTS

[Content Warnings](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Playlist](#)

1. [Cal Walker](#)
2. [Cal Walker](#)
3. [Cal Walker](#)
4. [Cal Walker](#)
5. [Ryan Fairview](#)
6. [Cal Walker](#)
7. [Cal Walker](#)
8. [Ryan Fairview](#)
9. [Ryan Fairview](#)
10. [Cal Walker](#)
11. [Cal Walker](#)
12. [Ryan Fairview](#)
13. [Cal Walker](#)
14. [Ryan Fairview](#)
15. [Cal Walker](#)
16. [Cal Walker](#)
17. [Cal Walker](#)
18. [Cal Walker](#)
19. [Ryan Fairview](#)
20. [Ryan Fairview](#)
21. [Cal Walker](#)
22. [Ryan Fairview](#)
23. [Ryan Fairview](#)
24. [Cal Walker](#)
25. [Cal Walker](#)
26. [Cal Walker](#)
27. [Ryan Fairview](#)
28. [Cal Walker](#)

29. [Ryan Fairview](#)
30. [Ryan Fairview](#)
31. [Ryan Fairview](#)
32. [Ryan Fairview](#)
33. [Cal Walker](#)
34. [Ryan Fairview](#)
35. [Ryan Fairview](#)
36. [Cal Walker](#)
37. [Ryan Fairview](#)
38. [Cal Walker](#)
39. [Ryan Fairview](#)
40. [Cal Walker](#)
41. [Ryan Fairview](#)
42. [Cal Walker](#)
43. [Ryan Fairview](#)
44. [Ryan Fairview](#)
45. [Ryan Fairview](#)
46. [Cal Walker](#)
47. [Cal Walker](#)
48. [Ryan Fairview](#)
49. [Cal Walker](#)
50. [Ryan Fairview](#)
51. [Ryan Fairview](#)
52. [Cal Walker](#)
53. [Cal Walker](#)
54. [Vox Moretti](#)
55. [Vox Moretti](#)
56. [Cal Walker](#)
57. [Ryan Fairview](#)
58. [Cal Walker](#)
59. [Vox Moretti](#)
60. [Ryan Fairview](#)
61. [Cal Walker](#)
62. [Cal Walker](#)
63. [Cal Walker](#)
64. [Ryan Fairview](#)

65. [Ryan Fairview](#)
66. [Ryan Fairview](#)
67. [Cal Walker](#)
68. [Cal Walker](#)
69. [Ryan Fairview](#)
70. [Ryan Fairview](#)
71. [Ryan Fairview](#)
72. [Cal Walker](#)
73. [Ryan Fairview](#)
74. [Ryan Fairview](#)
75. [Ryan Fairview](#)
76. [Cal Walker](#)
77. [Cal Walker](#)
78. [Cal Walker](#)
79. [Cal Walker](#)
80. [Ryan Fairview](#)
81. [Ryan Fairview](#)
82. [Cal Walker](#)
83. [Cal Walker](#)
84. [Ryan Fairview](#)
85. [Cal Walker](#)
86. [Ryan Fairview](#)
87. [Ryan Fairview](#)
88. [Cal Walker](#)
89. [Cal Walker](#)
90. [Ryan Fairview](#)
91. [Ryan Fairview](#)
92. [Cal Walker](#)
93. [Cal Walker](#)
94. [Ryan Fairview](#)
95. [Ryan Fairview](#)
96. [Cal Walker](#)
97. [Ryan Fairview](#)
98. [Ryan Fairview](#)
99. [Cal Walker](#)
100. [Vox Moretti](#)

101. [Ryan Fairview](#)

102. [Ryan Fairview](#)

103. [Vox Moretti](#)

104. [Ryan Fairview](#)

105. [Cal Walker](#)

106. [Cal Walker](#)

107. [Ryan Fairview](#)

[Epilogue 1](#)

[Epilogue 2](#)

[Endnotes/Acknowledgements](#)

[Now for Acknowledgements](#)

[Also by Alexandra St Pierre](#)

[*OceanofPDF.com*](#)

CONTENT WARNINGS



This is a dark mm romance. If you are not familiar with the dark romance genre, I urge you to proceed with caution. This book contains explicit on page scenes of violence, torture, domestic and parental abuse, child neglect as well as explicit scenes where consent is not clearly given.

Additionally, there is a scene where two characters intentionally trigger a PTSD response in an effort to help one of them overcome trauma.

THIS IS NOT RECOMMENDED IN REAL LIFE.

If you or someone you love suffers from PTSD, working with triggers should only be done under the supervision of a mental healthcare professional. This is a work of fiction and should **NOT** be used as a guidebook in ANY way.

For a full list of content warnings please navigate to the author's website: alexandrastpierre.com.

Your mental health matters.

[OceanofPDF.com](https://oceanofpdf.com)

AUTHOR'S NOTE



Hello my lil' psychos!

I'm so excited for you guys to meet these characters! Cal and Ryan walked into my brain one day and set up shop, begging me to tell their story, so here we are!

If this is your first Alex STP book - welcome! If you're a seasoned psycho, then you know what you're getting into.

My books tend to be dark, depraved, angsty and a little funny. This book is no exception. Although Cal may be one of my goofier characters, he's had a really tough life and is a victim of all kinds of abuse. Most of it is off page or eluded too, but if you have *any* triggers at all, please make sure to check the full list on my website: alexandrastpierre.com.

As with most of my other work, you can expect to find heavy themes of SA, as well as explicit on-page non-con/dub-con scenes. They're not as prevalent or frequent as they are in *Deathtrap* but there are definitely instances where some *AHEM* questionable, stuff goes down, so be prepared.

ALSO, speaking of *Deathtrap*, I'm excited to announce that there's a cameo in here from some fan favorites. They will appear at the end of this story. SO - If you've already read *Deathtrap*, that's something fun for you to look forward to! If you HAVEN'T read *Deathtrap*, and find yourself wondering who the two snarky unnamed dudes at the end are, you know where to go to learn more about them ;).

Another thing worth mentioning in the up front - this book is the first in an interconnected stand alone series, but it's also part of a **shared world with Alina May**. *and the crowd goes wild! AH HH AH HH AH HH clap clap*

We had SO much fun writing this together, and the cross over scenes with Alina's characters, Ronan, Logan and Dakota, were some of the highlights for me while writing this story. It doesn't matter which order you read these books in, but if you're starting with the *Mercenary and the Mortician*, then want to know more about that cutie with the highland cow plush, head on over to *Make Me* by Alina May to get the full story!

Also, one more quick note on the playlist. This playlist was created with a great deal of intention. So if you're the type of person who loves playlist pairings with your books, I highly recommend you put each song on a loop for the duration of its assigned chapter to ensure you're getting the desired effect. Also, for chapter 87, the song is Paradise Circus - Massive Attack, Zeds Dead Remix. This is only available on Youtube and is not on Spotify, however it MUST BE THIS VERSION! This song will give you full body chillssss while you read! Eeek! So excited for you!

Alright, I'm done yammering. You ready? CUZ YOU BETTER BE READY!

CAL:

They're not ready.

RYAN:

pinches nose Callum! Don't be rude. They're about as ready as I was when you barged into my life.

CAL:

Smirks In that case, they're almost ready. They just need a lil' help lubing up.

RYAN:

Jesus Christ. You're a menace.

CAL:

I'm your menace, baby. ;)

OceanofPDF.com

PLAYLIST



- Chapter 1: *The Secret History* - The Chamber Orchestra of London, Andrew Skeet
- Chapter 4: *Scary Monsters and Nice Sprites* - Skrillex
- Chapter 5: *Rescue Me* - Unions
- Chapter 7: *Too Good* - Able Heart
- Chapter 9: *Animals* - Maroon 5
- Chapter 15: *Riot* - Hollywood Undead
- Chapter 19: *Ain't No Rest For The Wicked* - Original Version - Cage The Elephant
- Chapter 20: *DARKSIDE* - Bring Me The Horizon
- Chapter 24: *Frozen (feat. 070 Shake)* - Madonna, Sickick, 070 Shake
- Chapter 31: *Swim* - Chase Atlantic
- Chapter 36: *Fistfight* - The Ballroom Thieves
- Chapter 37: *Talk* - Hozier
- Chapter 40: *Skinny Love* - Birdy
- Chapter 45: *On My Knees* - RÜFÜS DU SOL

Chapter 52: *Eyes On Fire* - Zeds Dead Remix - Blue Foundation, Zeds Dead
Chapter 55: *Smells Like Teen Spirit* - Witchz
Chapter 56: *Deep End* - Vanthe, Awon, Melrose Avenue
Chapter 60: *Atlantis* - Seafret
Chapter 62: *The Magick* - Demo - Witchz
Chapter 64: *Strange* - Celeste
Chapter 68: *Medicine* - Daughter
Chapter 72: *Stay* - Rihanna, Mikky Ekko
Chapter 76: *Seeds* - Yoke Lore
Chapter 78: *Cinema* - Benny Benassi, Gary Go, Skrillex
Chapter 79: *Suffocate* - Kayzo, Bad Omens
Chapter 80: *Wicked Game* - Lusaint
Chapter 81: *I Feel Like I'm Drowning* - Two Feet
Chapter 82: *Unfolding* - Luca Fogale
Chapter 87: *Paradise Circus* - Massive Attack, Zeds Dead Remix ([Youtube Version](#))
Chapter 90: *I Wanna Dance With Somebody* - Sleep Token
Chapter 94: *HIT EM WHERE IT HURTS* - PawPaw Rod
Chapter 95: *Little Did I Know* - Julia Michaels
Chapter 96: *The Sound of Silence* - Disturbed
Chapter 100: *Big Dawgs* - Hanumankind, Kalmi
Chapter 103: *nameless* - Stevie Howie
Chapter 106: *Glass Houses* - Bad Omens
Epilogue 1: *Addicted To You* - Avicii
Epilogue 2: *Us* - James Bay

Find the full playlist on Spotify! Search: The Mercenary and the Mortician

OceanofPDF.com

*To everyone who's ever had to save themselves.
May you find your Ryan.*

OceanofPDF.com



(Age 10)

Alexa, play: The Secret History - The Chamber Orchestra of London,
Andrew Skeet

One of the bars to my cage came loose.
Finally.

I had been working at getting a bar free for two days.

Two whole days that our mother hadn't come down to feed us.

This was the longest she had ever left us down here without checking in. My older sister Cass told me she didn't think our mother was coming back at all. The moment she said that I decided I was going to try to break us out. As the bottom of the bar broke free, a small thrill ricocheted through me.

I grinned. My efforts had been rewarded.

“Cass,” I whispered, getting her attention. She had been staring at Naomi, who had finally passed out from exhaustion.

Naomi was our younger sister. She was only three and had cried for almost the entire first day our mother locked us down here. She needed to be held, changed, and fed.

My mother kept the three of us locked in separate cages, so there was no way of getting close enough to comfort her, and it was *killing me*. If we didn’t get to her soon, I was worried our baby sister might not make it.

Cassandra’s brown eyes widened when she realized what I had accomplished. She met my gaze head-on, biting her chapped bottom lip.

“If she catches you, she’ll kill you,” she whispered to me. I ignored the cold spike of terror that shot through my veins.

“If we don’t get out of here, we’re going to die anyway,” I replied matter-of-factly. This wasn’t the first time I thought I might die from my mother’s neglect. It didn’t really bother me to think about it. This was just normal for me.

For us.

The fear I was feeling wasn’t for myself. It was for Naomi. If we didn’t get her some water or something to eat, she might die... and *that* was unacceptable to me.

I pried the bar completely out of the slots I had diligently worn down and got to work shimmying my way through the gap.

Considering I was lucky if my mother fed me three square meals a week, I was thin enough to fit through. Sometimes, we just got table scraps, which I had come to look forward to. It was better than nothing.

First, I worked in my legs, then my hips, and finally, my head and shoulders. There was a moment of blind panic when I thought my head might get stuck, but with a few hushed words of encouragement from Cass, I was able to wiggle through.

I rushed to Cassandra’s cage, and she pushed her arms through the bars immediately, her chocolate eyes filling with tears. We held onto each other with the kind of fierce desperation that comes with a complete lack of human contact.

“Hurry,” she whispered. “See if you can find the keys. Don’t get caught,” she hissed, reluctantly pulling away from me to brush a strand of thick, dark hair out of her eyes. I nodded. My own greasy mop of black hair rustling with the movement.

There was enough light filtering into the unfinished basement from one of the tiny windows that I could more or less see where I was going.

I picked through the minefield of junk and garbage, making my way toward the stairs. As badly as I wanted to go to Naomi, I didn't want to wake her.

Not until she was free.

I knew my way upstairs. Mom didn't keep us locked down here *all* the time. Sometimes, she would be in a really good mood and let us all come up to the main floor. During those times, we would get baths and even sit at the table to eat with her.

It was my fault we got locked up this time. She had hit Cass, and I got really angry at her. I should have known better than to lose my temper. Because of my mistake, Naomi might die, and it would be all my fault.

Shoving down the intense feelings of panic and guilt at the thought of failing my sisters, I crept up the creaky wooden steps. I flinched each time one of the steps groaned under my feet, but thankfully, no one came to check on the noise.

My heart leapt to my throat as my eyes clocked a key ring hanging from a nail on the wall by the door to the main floor.

I found the keys!

Forcing myself not to rush too quickly up the stairs, I stretched up with shaking fingers. I could barely reach them, but when my fingers closed around the cold steel, it took everything in me not to whoop with excitement.

As quietly as possible, I rushed back down the stairs to Cassandra's cage. My excitement turned out to be premature, however, when I discovered there were only two keys on the key ring.

Two keys, three cages... please let one of these be the key for Naomi's cage...

"You found them?" Cass asked, her voice breathy. I nodded, biting down on my own chapped lip in worry.

"Yeah, but there's only two of them."

Cassandra's eyes flashed. "I think she keeps one on her neck," she whispered. "That's why she's always wearing that black cord."

My hands began to shake, but Cassandra continued.

"If the keys are for you and Naomi, you need to leave me and take her to get help. Don't try to get the other key. It's too risky," Cassandra said

urgently.

I narrowed my eyes on her. She was only thirteen, but she always seemed like more of a grownup to me than our mom.

"I'm not leaving you," I said firmly, shoving one of the keys into the lock that kept her door shut. It slid right in. I turned it and it *clicked*, and the lock popped open.

We both stared at the open lock in shock for a moment before Cass reached forward with trembling fingers to let herself out.

"I can't believe it worked..." I whispered, and she snatched the keyring from me and rushed to Naomi's cage next.

With bated breath, I watched as she rammed the keys into the lock on Naomi's cage.

Neither of them worked. The other key was for mine.

"*Shit!*" Cass whisper-yelled, tossing the keys away in frustration. I crept up behind her, unable to look away from the shallow rise and fall of our baby sister's chest.

"What are we going to do?" I asked, keeping my voice quieter than a mouse.

Cass turned to look at me, her brown eyes burning with a fire that I had only seen a few times before. She only ever looked like that when Mom punished me or refused to let her take care of Naomi.

"You're going to run and get help. I'm going to get Naomi's key."

2



Cal Walker

(Age 10)

As I followed Cass up the stairs, my heart was beating so hard in my chest that I worried my mother would hear it.

Cass peeked through the crack in the door, holding her hand back to stop me from continuing forward as she did her best to assess whether or not my mother was close by. After a beat, she turned to me, putting her hands on my bony shoulders.

She had dirt smudged on her face and was wearing a filthy purple T-shirt with a stupid unicorn on it, but she still somehow looked fearless and brave.

“I’m going to go first. If she catches us, I’ll distract her. You run for the door and scream as loud as you can once you’re out there. Look for other people. The first person you see, get their attention, okay?”

Nibbling on the dry skin of my lip, I frowned.

I didn't like that plan. Cassandra could seriously get hurt by the time I was able to come back with help.

"You come with me," I argued, meeting her gaze. She gave me what I was sure she thought was a reassuring smile.

"I will if I can, but if she catches us, it's more important that one of us makes it outside. You're the fastest; it makes more sense if you run."

How did she know I was the fastest? We have never had a chance to run around and play. Her legs were longer than mine.

"I don't know..."

"Cal, we don't have time for this. We need to get Naomi out of here." Her eyes were burning again, and I knew there was no arguing with her. Finally, I gave her a firm nod.

"Okay," I agreed, and the corner of her lip quirked up.

"Good." She pulled me into a quick hug, and I threw my arms around her waist, drawing her close to me. We both smelled awful, but I didn't care. I buried my face into her ugly purple shirt, so glad to be able to touch someone after days of no contact at all.

We broke apart, and I held my breath as she pushed open the door to the main floor.

It was quiet.

There was almost as much trash and clutter up here as there was in the basement, and we had to pick our way through the mess as we moved.

We didn't even bother heading to the front door, as my mother had used the front foyer as a dumping ground for half-finished 'furniture flipping projects' that never seemed to get finished. She claimed it was a good way to earn extra cash, though I assume one would have to actually sell a piece to profit from it.

We would never be able to quietly move the heavy pieces out of the way. So, instead, we tip-toed toward the kitchen, hoping to go out the back door.

Neither of us spoke, but I so badly wanted to ask Cass where she thought our mother was. It was so quiet it almost sounded like the house was empty.

Was it really going to be this easy to escape?

My foot crunched on a styrofoam takeout container that was full of rotting food and roaches. I tried not to wince as we crept past the rickety kitchen table that was buried in ancient newspapers.

Cass was several feet ahead of me, and I almost squealed in excitement as her fingers closed around the brass knob of the back door.

This was real! This was happening... we were really going to go outside!

My whole body was humming with a strange sort of electricity, and I grinned as Cassandra's fingers turned the knob, and the door cracked open, spilling golden light into the disgusting kitchen.

There was a rustle of movement behind me, like a rhino was stomping through the pile of garbage on the floor.

Before I knew what was happening, cold, nicotine-stained fingers wrapped around my neck.

"What the *fuck* do you think you little demons are doing!?" my mother screeched. I tried to run, but she spun me around, backhanding me across the face so hard I saw stars.

"What are you doing out of the basement?" Foul-smelling spittle splattered across my face, and I was met with her dark, bloodshot eyes. Her hair fell in inky strings around her gaunt face, and I felt my bones lock up in terror.

She always said that we were demons sent from the devil to punish her, but right in that moment, *she* looked like she was evil incarnate.

She wrapped her hands around my throat and squeezed so hard I choked.

"You've tested me for the last time, little devil boy! Were you planning to infect the world with your sins?"

I choked and wheezed as her fingers tightened even harder. She shook me as she squeezed, and black spots began to bleed across my vision.

"Mommy, please... stop. Don't you love me?"

"Love you!? Who could ever love the devil?" She was squeezing my throat so hard I was worried she would snap my neck.

A strange feeling of euphoria began to spread through me as my vision finally completely succumbed to darkness.

I was floating in a sea of oblivion, wondering if I really was the devil and if I deserved to have been born in this hell in which I had been raised.

Suddenly, the pressure on my neck disappeared, and I sucked in a life-saving breath. A hot, thick liquid splattered across my face. Some got in my mouth.

It tasted like metal.

Blinking away the darkness, I found myself lying on the disgusting kitchen floor, covered in a sticky, red substance.

Cass was standing behind my mother, who was also on the ground. Though she was in worse shape than me. She was twitching violently and making a strange gurgling sound as she clawed at her throat.

Blood was shooting from her neck in thick, periodic spurts, and it took me a moment to realize that it was because her throat had been slit.

My wide eyes fell to Cassandra's hand, which was clutching a bloody kitchen knife. Her face was nearly paper white, and her lips were a firm line... but her eyes... They were burning with that same angry fire.

She didn't look sorry.

She looked *relieved*.

"Cass..." I croaked, and she seemed to snap out of the trance she had been caught in. She dropped the knife and rushed to me, concern flooding every line of her face.

"Cal... are you okay?" she asked, and I nodded, even though I wasn't sure if that was true. My ears were ringing, and everything felt like it was moving in slow motion.

I was *soaked* in our mother's blood when Cass barely had a drop on her. She must have attacked our mother from behind when she had been strangling me.

"Naomi," I rasped, my voice still not working properly. Cassandra's eyes fell to my neck, which was already so sore that I was afraid to touch it.

"I'll go get her. You stay here, I'll only be a minute." She breathed, and I nodded again. Cass ran back to our mother's corpse and ripped the black cord from her neck. Sure enough, there was a key on it.

Cass grinned at it triumphantly and fled back to the basement to free our baby sister.

While she was gone, I forced myself to get gingerly to my feet. Creeping forward, I looked down at the gruesome sight of my dead mother. Her eyes were wide and unseeing, and her mouth was hanging open. It was full of blood, and bile rose up the back of my throat at the sight of it.

I forced myself to look away, more because the thought of puking with my neck so bruised was not appealing at all. My gaze snagged on the knife Cass had used to kill our mother, and I picked it up, examining it curiously.

The sticky red substance was already congealing on the unforgiving steel of the blade, and I caught sight of my reflection in the parts of the

knife that weren't coated in my mother's blood.

I didn't feel bad that my mom was dead.

I didn't *feel* anything.

I was numb.

I found myself wondering what my sister had felt when she had dragged the blade across my mother's throat.

Had it felt good?

Did she like it?

My fingers quivered on the handle, and my mouth watered.

I imagined it would have felt good.

Suddenly, I heard muffled voices coming from outside the front door. My head jerked up at the sound. I strained my ears, trying to hear the words.

"Thank goodness you're here, officers. I've called in what feels like a hundred times. There's always screaming coming from this house. I swear there are kids in there. No one ever does more than knock!"

Still clutching the knife, I stepped to the side enough that I could peer down the hallway to the front door.

There were silhouettes of people behind the window that my mother had covered with contact paper.

There was a loud knock on the door, followed by a gruff, *"Please relax, ma'am, and let us do our job!"*

"Hey!" I called out, though my voice was still damaged from the trauma my mother had inflicted mere moments before. "Help!" I coughed, taking a step forward. I wasn't sure they would see or hear me. Outside of the contact paper, there were so many wardrobes and armchairs between me and the door.

"Didn't you hear that! Someone called for help in there!" The woman sounded panicked, and suddenly, the banging on the door got louder.

"Open the door, or we're coming in!" one of the officers yelled.

"Help!" I tried crying out again as I struggled to push one of the half-painted dressers out of the way.

The door rattled now with the force of the blows the man on the other side was inflicting.

"Cal? What's happening?" I whipped around to see Cassandra stepping out onto the main floor, a tiny, whimpering Naomi cradled against her shoulder.

“Help came,” I coughed, just as the front door blew open to expose two uniformed officers and a very concerned lady I had never seen before.

She must be the ‘nosey’ neighbor our mother had always complained about.

The big, burly men barreled into the house, shoving the bulky furniture out of their way like it was nothing.

Cass came up to stand next to me, balancing Naomi in one arm, and she reached out to grab my hand.

She didn’t notice that I was clutching the bloody knife she had used to kill our mother... but the police did.

OceanofPDF.com

3



Cal Walker

(Age ten)

“You’re not going to get in trouble if you tell the truth,” the detective said. “It was clearly self-defense; we just need to make sure we put the right information in the papers.”

I was sitting in a plastic chair in what I heard the police call a ‘soft room.’ My legs dangled in the air, and I kicked them in agitation as the man questioned me.

This room was much quieter than the rest of the station, and I was grateful they hadn’t made me sit outside in one of those other rooms. The police station was bright, busy, and *loud*. I had never been anywhere like this before or seen so many people in one place.

This detective seemed nice. He had given me a packet that he told me was full of sweets called ‘fuzzy peaches,’ and they were pretty much the most amazing things I had ever tasted. I still didn’t trust him, though. He

had separated me from my sisters, and I didn't like that. Plus, I was frustrated that he didn't seem to really be *listening* to me. No matter how many times I answered the same question, he seemed to keep wanting me to repeat my answer.

The detective's favorite thing to ask me was if I was *sure* that Cassandra was the one who had killed our mother.

Instead of answering, I just sighed and looked at my feet.

I didn't have any shoes. We had never left the house, so there really hadn't been any need for something like shoes.

Everything was too much. I was shaking and overwhelmed. I just wanted to curl up in a ball and hide from the world.

Staring at my socked feet, I sniffed.

I didn't want to be here... but I also didn't want to be where I had come from. Was there somewhere in between? Somewhere safe I could go with my sisters where no one would hurt us?

Suddenly, the door opened, and another policeman walked in. A flash of annoyance crossed the detective's face at the interruption.

"Someone's here; he wants to see the kid."

The detective who'd been interviewing me looked even more annoyed.

"I'll be right back," the detective said before stepping out of the room with the other cop. They shut the door behind them, but it didn't close all the way, and I could hear their muffled conversation through the crack.

"What do you mean? Has the captain approved this?" the detective asked in a low voice.

"He's from the state; the captain has no say. His name is Damian. Damian Ryker."

The detective got really quiet after that.

"Alright," the detective finally said before coming back into the room.

"Callum?" he said softly. I glanced up at him, chewing on my chapped bottom lip, wishing I had some fuzzy peaches left to chew on instead.

"Someone else is going to come talk to you for a bit, okay?"

I shrugged. It didn't matter to me. I just wanted this to be over.

The detective left, and I went back to staring at my shoeless feet, which dangled under the table.

Soon, the door opened again, and another pair of feet appeared on the other side of the table.

These feet had shoes on. They wore polished dress shoes with fancy pants cuffed neatly around the ankles.

I followed the elegantly dressed legs to find they were attached to an elegantly dressed man.

He was lean but muscled, and though I hadn't met many people in real life, he was nothing like the men my mother used to bring home.

This man looked like he came from a completely different world than my mother. He was in a suit that had clean lines, and a diamond earring glinted in the lobe of his right ear. His thick, healthy, chestnut brown hair was soft and styled perfectly against his head.

Penetrating, whiskey-colored eyes met mine, and a warm smile curled across lips painted on a perfectly symmetrical, chiseled jaw.

"You must be Callum Walker," the man said, his voice rolling over me like honey and ... something thicker.

He reached out a large masculine hand. I stared at it blankly, not knowing what he wanted me to do with it. He cocked his head to the side at my hesitation. I didn't understand the look on his face, but I wasn't sure I liked it.

"When a man offers you a hand, you're meant to shake it. It's how you show you're willing to do business," he explained. I squinted up at him in confusion.

"B... business?" I whispered, my voice still barely a rasp.

He pinched his pants over his thighs and tugged them up as he crouched down in front of me, getting on my level.

"You have a lot to learn, Callum Walker," he said, that viscous voice of his making my hair stand on end.

Why did he keep saying my full name like that?

I glanced around, hoping to catch sight of Cassandra and Naomi, but the man reached forward and pinched my chin between his fingers. He jerked my head back to face him.

"Pay attention when I'm speaking to you, Mr. Walker," he ordered, that hypnotizing voice of his hardening from sweet honey to hard amber.

"Now. Word on the street is your sister slit your momma's throat. Is that true?"

I eyed this domineering man up and down. Something about him told me he was dangerous, and I needed to be careful what I said to him.

The deep-seated part of me that felt fiercely protective of both Cass and Naomi made me want to keep his attention off of them.

He released my jaw, and I glanced down at my blood-caked T-shirt before meeting his unsettling gaze again.

“What do you think?” I rasped, genuinely curious. The detectives didn’t seem to believe Cass. Did this man believe her? Something told me he wasn’t a detective... He didn’t seem like anyone else who worked here at all...

“It’s hard to say. The knife wound in your mother’s neck looks like it was carved from behind, which aligns with your sister’s story.” He mused, rocking back in his heels. “It would explain why she’s not covered in blood.”

I nodded, biting my lip nervously, waiting to see what else he would say.

“However, it doesn’t explain why you were the one holding the knife,” he said, his eyes flashing with a terrifying sort of delight.

“Did you kill her, Callum? You can tell me if you did. You won’t get in trouble.”

I knew he wanted me to say that I did it. He was looking at me so intensely. I wasn’t sure *why*, but he wanted me to tell him I had killed her. What would happen to Cass if this commanding man thought *she* had done it?

“What will happen if I tell you I did it?” I whispered.

A scary smile spread wide across his face, and he patted my knee in a way that I thought was meant to be comforting.

“I will set you and your sisters up in a nice house. You’ll have a caretaker until you turn eighteen, after which you will be given enough money to do whatever it is your little heart desires. The only catch is you will have to come work for me.”

“Work for you?”

He nodded, his eyes never leaving mine. The way they crinkled at the corners reminded me of a picture of a man my mom said was called Santa Claus. I found the print of the character in one of the garbage piles in our living room two winters ago.

“Yes, Mr. Walker.”

I couldn’t seem to look away from his perfectly tanned face.

Work for him.

A sick feeling curled in my gut, and I had a feeling that I wouldn't like working for him.

"What happens if I tell you my sister did it?" My voice was so quiet this time that I wondered if he would even hear me.

"I will set you and your sisters up in a nice house. You'll have a caretaker until you turn eighteen, after which you will be given enough money to do whatever it is your little heart desires... but, in this scenario, it's your sister who comes to work for me."

A shiver rolled through me, and I shook my head immediately, blood-soaked strands of my hair whipping against the sides of my head with the ferocity of the movement.

"No, no. I did it. I killed her," I rasped, and the man's smile widened.

He removed his hand from my knee and held it out in front of me again, flashing perfectly straight, white teeth.

I reached out and placed my hand in his. He squeezed my hand firmly, giving it a firm shake.

His whiskey eyes glittered, and he smiled at me, his face inches away from mine.

"Looking forward to doing business with you, Mr. Walker," he purred, and I wondered if I had just signed a deal with the devil my mother had always talked so much about.



Cal Walker

*Present Day
(Age twenty-six)*

Alexa, Play: Scary Monsters and Nice Sprites - Skrillex

Scary Monsters and Nice Sprites by Skrillex played through my speakers at a much lower volume than the song deserved.

However, I wasn't able to crank it the way I wanted to.

I was currently parked across the street from a kid's play park in my murdered out Bentley, waiting for Naomi to come back with recon on my next target. I was already conspicuous enough without blasting rave-level decibels of dubstep all over this suburb on a casual Tuesday afternoon.

Not that these boring ass people wouldn't benefit from a little bit of excitement... I just didn't want to get another fucking lecture from Damian.

'The loudest man in the room is the weakest, Mr. Walker.'

Fuck. *Off.*

If I had to listen to that asshole quote ‘*American Gangster*’ one more time, I was going to put a bullet through my own damn skull.

As it was, I usually just sat there and absorbed whatever bullshit he was trying to indoctrinate me with.

At the ripe young age of ten, I learned that there was no arguing with Damian Ryker. You just obeyed, or you paid for it.

Happily, we were more or less aligned in our interests, and I rarely felt the need to argue with him.

Taking the deal to work for Damian that day in the precinct had been the best decision of my life. He had stayed true to his word and set my sisters and me up in a house nicer than anything little ten-year-old me had ever seen on fucking TV, let alone in real life.

We all still lived there in this glitz-ass townhouse downtown in Silent Hollow.

Everything had been financially taken care of. He said it was because ‘*I had earned it.*’

Which, I guess was pretty fucking true.

Ryker had started conditioning me literally the day after we put my mother in the ground. Some may hear something like that and think it harsh... but I was willing to learn.

The funny thing about being raised in a cage is it makes you *angry*... and angry people want *vengeance*.

The first few kills Ryker weaned me into were child abusers. Parents who had done to their kids what had been done to me, Cass, and Naomi... Or worse. As soon as I learned what their crimes had been, I had no problem slitting their throats.

I remembered wondering what it had been like for Cass to kill our mother... Well, thanks to Ryker, I didn’t need to wait long to find out.

For the first few years, when I had been too small, Ryker used to deliver my prey to me bound and gagged. Over time, he taught me how to get strong—how to fight.

He had a whole team of people who were experts in our craft. I learned all sorts of shit.

How to pick locks, how to stalk people, how to hack into secure networks, and how to become invisible.

But most importantly, Ryker had taught me that life was *fucking short* and to take whatever the fuck you wanted today because you might not live to see tomorrow.

With that outlook on life, I had ripped through my early twenties in a blazing glory of money, sex, murder, and really good drugs.

As long as I showed up and never missed a job, Ryker didn't give a shit what I did in my spare time.

Cassandra did... somewhat. She didn't like that I worked for Ryker. She had been against it from day one.

It was a pretty regular fight we got into... one she didn't really have a leg to stand on, if I was being honest.

"Oh, you don't like it, Cass? Go cry into your law degree."

I smirked at the thought, sliding my Ray-Bans down my nose and settling deeper into the black leather of my seat. Tugging my hoodie further over my head, I tapped my thumbs on the steering wheel to the beat of the song.

That usually shut her the fuck up. She could turn her nose up at the way I provided for us all she wanted, but she always took the money the same way Naomi and I did.

She made enough on her own now as a high-powered Ivy League lawyer to move out and get her own place, but she would always know where she got her start from.

My fucking blood money.

Whatever. It's not like her hands were lily white. Not like Naomi's...

Speaking of the angel, she was skipping up to my Bentley with her usual bright smile.

She was wearing a cute little white dress and flip-flops, her bright blonde hair piled on top of her head with a bunch of clips that looked like tiny daisies.

Naomi was this little pulse of sunshine in my otherwise depraved life, and she was the apple of both mine and Cassandra's eye.

Cass *hated* that she came to help me with my... *hobby*.

Naomi popped open the passenger door and climbed into the car, wrinkling her nose up at my music.

She reached forward and fiddled with the dial, switching the Bluetooth to her phone. I rolled my eyes as she keyed up some T Swift. Naomi was

literally the only person on the planet that I would allow to change the music in my car.

“Find anyone?” I asked her, punching the ‘on’ button and firing up the engine.

Her smile faltered, but she nodded, her brown eyes darkening.

All three of us looked similar. We all had dark hair, brown eyes, and olive skin; however, Naomi started dyeing her hair blonde from as early as I could remember.

“Yeah. There’s a little boy who moves like he’s injured under his shirt. Kind of like that kid last month that had all the cigarette burns.”

Rage flared through me at her words. My own scars from the burns our mother had crushed into my chest bled out a phantom ache.

You see, on paper, I was Damian Ryker’s weapon. I killed for him regularly, and the more accustomed I became to murder, the less I cared about the reason behind the jobs he assigned me.

As long as the jobs didn’t interfere with my one rule, I didn’t really give a fuck who I was killing.

What’s my one rule, you ask?

No. Kids.

Women? Sure. I wasn’t under the delusion that women were any more innocent than their male counterparts.

Look at my mother. She made Satan look like a saint.

As far as I was concerned, both men and women had equal potential for evil, but I *did* have a line.

And it was the age of majority.

Ryker had tried to put me on a job with a kid once, and I had lost my *fucking* shit. I told him that I didn’t care what he did, but if I found out he was taking jobs with kids as the marks, we were done.

At that point, I was valuable and dangerous enough that he couldn’t really argue with me. He just gave me one of his more considering looks and conceded.

“*No kids.*” He agreed, and since then, instead of spending my weeks between jobs at raves losing my mind on molly, I’ve been hunting down monsters like my mother... and Naomi has been helping.

You see, someone like me can’t really sit at a child’s play park and watch kids all day. The moms got understandably... *antsy*.

But Naomi could. She sits on a bench and makes small talk with the moms, all the while keeping an eye out specifically for kids who are showing signs of abuse.

Then, she comes back to my car, points out the kid... and then the real fun begins.

"That's him," she said, pointing out her tinted window to a small boy who had broken away from the crowded park. He was sullenly kicking an empty can down the sidewalk with his hands in his pockets on what I assumed was his way home.

"Put your seatbelt on," I demanded, though I couldn't look away from the child. He was holding his elbows close to him as if moving them too much hurt.

I narrowed my eyes, and Naomi rolled hers.

"Such a mother hen." She smirked, pulling her belt across her waist and clipping it into place.

I shot her an affectionate grin and tapped her on the nose.

"Hey. Someone needs to look out for the Gnome," I chirped, and she scowled.

"God. If our mother wasn't already dead, I would kill her just for calling me Naomi. Gnome has to be the worst nickname in the history of nicknames," she grumbled.

I laughed.

"Such a rough life you lead, little gnome." I smirked, throwing the car into drive.

"Now, let's find out what kind of monster is hurting this little kid so I can show them what a real monster looks like."

Naomi gave me a smile that somehow crossed the line from innocent to sinister, and my heart swelled.

"Have I ever told you I'm so proud to call you my big brother?" she asked softly, and I glanced at her from behind my Ray-Bans, my tattooed fingers tightening on the supple leather of the steering wheel.

"I could stand to hear it more often." I winked at her, and she laughed.

"You're such a ham." She giggled, and I cranked up the volume.

"Whatever. You love it. Now listen to Taylor. If you're going to insist on blasting this shit in my car, you better fucking pay attention."

5



Ryan Fairview

Present Day
(Age twenty-seven)

Alexa, Play: Rescue Me - Unions

The first time I spoke to a dead person, I was eight years old. I didn't know she was dead at the time. I just thought she was a nice old lady who wanted to read me a bedtime story.

Her name was Mrs. Williams, and she just sort of...*appeared* at the end of my bed. She read me one of my favorite Berenstain Bears books until I fell asleep.

It was nice.

It wasn't until the next morning that I realized Mrs. Williams was dead. When I went downstairs to find my dad in the preparation room putting

some final touches on the remains for the funeral my family was conducting that day, I froze.

There she was, lying in the casket, dead as dead can be. When I told my dad that she had come to see me in my room the night before, he told me I wasn't allowed in the preparation room anymore. I heard him talking to my mother later that night, telling her he was worried that raising me around so much death was negatively affecting my grasp on reality.

My mother had brushed him off, claiming that I was just '*sensitive*' to the paranormal... which, if you knew my mother, wouldn't surprise you.

God love her... she walks to the beat of her own drum, that woman. I supposed you would have to be at least *somewhat* quirky to marry a mortician.

After that, I stopped telling people about the ghosts I saw despite the fact that I began to see them more and more frequently. Especially as my sister, Theo, and I got older. We learned pretty quickly that kids were cruel, and the only thing people feared more than those they perceived to be different than themselves was.. well... *death*.

Being the children of Fairview Funerals, Theo and I were *not* popular in school.

The Frankenstein kids was one of the nicer names they used to call us. We also got a lot of Addams family jokes. The less polite kids straight-up called us freaks.

Theo, being a few years older than me, took on the role of protector at a young age. She's a lot... *angrier* than I am.

She took up boxing at age twelve, and let's just say... kids stopped jumping us on the way home after Theo sent one of the school bullies to the hospital with a broken nose and three missing teeth.

Shortly after that, she made me take up boxing, claiming that she wouldn't be around to protect me once she graduated. It didn't take much convincing, as the bullies just used the fact that I needed a *girl* to fight my battles for me as more ammunition.

As much as violence wouldn't be my first choice in any altercation, I did enjoy boxing. It was a great way to let off steam, and I would be lying if I said I hadn't needed to use it for self-defense a few times.

I still practice with Theo a lot. She built a gym in our basement next to the preparation room, and we spar frequently. For me, it's a way to stay in shape, but for Theo, it keeps her on top of her game. She doesn't talk about

it much, but she's involved in an underground street fighting ring. I wish she would join something more legitimate. It's hard for me to bite my tongue whenever she comes home with her face split open and needing stitches, but every time I hassle her about it, she brushes me off, telling me to mind my damn business.

She's a stubborn asshole, but she's my sister, so I put up with her shit no matter how pigheaded she is.

Anyway... I digress. Where was I? Oh yeah. The whole '*I see dead people thing*'...

Well, considering I had already been labeled a freak just for being born into a family that ran a funeral home, I felt it would be safe to assume that my frequent interactions with people's deceased loved ones wouldn't be well received. So, I became very secretive about my... *special* ability. However, sometimes, it was exceptionally difficult to keep my encounters with the dead to myself. Not all the ghosts I met were kind and harmless like Mrs. Williams.

You see, we accepted all types here at Fairview Funeral Services, and most of them came to visit me before they passed on. Whether I liked it or not.

I was seventeen when Mr. Holt staggered into the bathroom while I was showering. His brains had been leaking out of his cranium, and his one remaining eye had been dilated with a manic sort of fury.

'*You're a dirty whore! I'm going to fucking kill you, you dirty little slut!*' he had screamed at me, his dead, clammy hands passing right through me as he reached for my throat. I bolted out of the shower so *fucking fast*, running down the hall naked and screaming.

Mr. Holt had chased me, and it took my mother discovering me huddled under the blanket with my head between my knees to get rid of him.

She had lit a bushel of sage and salted the shit out of my room, which seemed to do the trick. My mom's witchy nature was another thing the kids at school often picked on us for, but after she had saved me from that angry spirit, I refused to allow myself to feel ashamed of her for it. Say what you would about my mother, but she knew what the fuck she was doing when it came to the occult.

After I had recovered from the gruesome encounter, I stormed down into the preparation room to find my father listening to his usual classical soundtrack and reconstructing Mr. Holt's skull.

I did a Google search for the name *Holt* and was bombarded with news articles detailing this man's murder-suicide. Apparently, he had raped and killed a young girl before blowing his own brains out.

Jesus.

I was *furious* that my father would accept the procession of such a monstrous human being. I told my father that we should be more selective about who we accepted in the future. He had given me a sad smile and shook his head, diligently continuing his work on the dead man's skull.

My father never made it his business to question the moral fiber of the people we entombed.

'Funerals are not for the dead, son.' My father had always said. *'They're for the living. What we do is important. We help people get closure and say goodbye. Without us, people would have a much harder time moving on.'*

At the ripe young age of seventeen, I had accepted this at face value and resolved to endure the nasty souls that haunted me for the sake of the families that mourned them. This piece of truth he had imparted rang especially true when he died a few short years later.

I was twenty-three and just wrapping up mortuary school when the renowned George Fairview, beloved husband of Iris Fairview and father of Theodora and Ryan Fairview, suffered a massive heart attack.

He passed away on a Thursday, and he was the first body I ever embalmed by myself.

It was also the first time I had ever been thankful for my *gifts*, as my mother called them.

My father had sat on the counter of the embalming room while I had worked on his body. We listened to all his favorite classical playlists, and he left me with a few final pieces of advice.

'Take care of your mother.' He made me promise, and I nodded, barely holding back tears.

She couldn't see him, but he spent the entire next day with her at his funeral before he faded away to wherever souls went after they died.

Watching my mother go through the grieving process after my father's death solidified what he had taught me.

Funerals were for the living.

I truly didn't know if my mother would have been able to move on from the death of my father if she hadn't been able to properly say goodbye that

day. The whole experience was tragic but somehow also incredibly profound. Since then, I have thrown myself into my work, proudly taking over the family business and following in my father's footsteps.

However, now, at age twenty-seven, with several years of experience under my belt, I wasn't sure I entirely agreed that funerals were *just* for the living anymore.

They had to be for the dead a *little bit*... considering the soul of whoever I had on my table usually hovered nearby, telling me *exactly* how they wanted their hair to look or whether or not I had applied too much rouge.

Like right now, Ms. Thompson was caterwauling in my ear about how her sister should have chosen the *blue* dress and that she should know better than to put her in *pink*. She was a winter, not a summer. Warm tones looked *horrible on her*.

"I think everyone is technically a winter after they die, Ms. Thompson," I murmured as I inserted injector needles into the upper jaw of her body. "But don't worry, I'll make sure your coloring suits the dress your sister chose for you before your final look. I learned from the best," I assured her ghost, who cocked her head to the side skeptically. She snorted.

"I'll believe it when I see it," she snipped as I wired the mouth to her body shut. I didn't say it out loud, but I kind of wished I could wire her spirit's mouth shut. She was one of the more annoying ones I had needed to deal with this week. I had just started the embalming process, and I was already sick of her.

There was a knock at the door, and Theo walked in without waiting for me to answer, as was her custom.

I let out an annoyed puff of air, glancing up at her with a frown.

"Can I help you? I'm in the middle of an embalming. You know better." My father had taught me that the embalming room was *sacred*. Only authorized personnel were allowed in. Though Theo lived here with my mother and me, she didn't *work* here... so authorized, she was *not*.

However, that had never stopped her before. She was glistening in sweat and wearing her usual men's black, dri-fit shorts and T-shirt combo that she wore for training.

Her dark brown hair was tied in a knot at the nape of her neck. Because of her naturally tall but stocky stature and insanely rigorous training

regimen, Theo was more built than most men I had met. Lucky fucker took after our father. I, on the other hand, took after our mother.

I had the misfortune of inheriting Iris' red hair and freckles, so while I shared the striking bone structure that my sister had, I was decidedly the less... *pursued* of the two of us.

In college, after we escaped the stigma that had followed us through high school, my sister's dorm had been a revolving door of women. I, on the other hand, seemed to attract a lot of female *friends*. Which, honestly, was fine with me. Sex with the few girls that *had* been interested in fucking me had always felt like more of a chore than anything.

I wasn't sure if it was because I spent my days touching dead bodies, but I rarely felt the desire to touch other people in any intimate way. That being said, I had never really had a long-term girlfriend until recently.

I finally found a girl who seemed as uninterested in sex as I was. Her name was Joanna, and she was a Sunday school teacher at St. Gabriel's Church. She was nice enough, and my relationship with her made me feel slightly more normal. At least when people asked if I was single, I could say 'no' now. One less awkward social situation to navigate.

"That weird kid who's obsessed with you is here again," Theo said, squirting her water bottle into her mouth.

That got my attention. Caleb was one of the neighbor's kids, and I was pretty sure he had a shitty home life. He had walked into the funeral home one day asking a ton of questions about death, and I had been overcome with the strangest feeling that the kid was trying to escape something and needed some form of sanctuary.

I had given him a tour of Fairview, taking him to the casket showroom and the visitation room. I explained the difference between an urn and a casket. He had a ton of questions about cremation.

Do we do it with their clothes on?

What about their jewelry?

What happens to their bones? Do they burn, too?

When I asked him if his parents knew where he was, he had gone very quiet, and the blood had drained from his face.

That was when I knew that something was very wrong and this little boy was suffering. I had called CPS, but nothing had come of it. So now, whenever he showed up, I just did my best to make him feel welcome and safe.

“I’m going to be at least another hour and a half,” I told Theo, gesturing to the naked corpse of Ms. Thompson I had just started embalming. *Honestly, maybe two hours if she keeps yammering the whole time.*

Theo rolled her eyes, looking irritated. “So what do you want me to do with him?”

“I don’t know, can’t you keep him company?”

Theo scoffed, holding up her hand to show me her taped and slightly bloody knuckles. “Do I look like a fucking babysitter?”

I scowled, growing increasingly fed up with both her and Ms. Thompson, who was now complaining loudly that I wasn’t giving her body the attention it deserved.

“Alright, bring him to the house and get him set up with some Netflix. Tell him I’ll come see him as soon as I can. If Mom’s home, see if she can spend some time with him.”

Theo rolled her eyes and shook her head. “You and your bleeding heart. Always taking in fucking strays,” she muttered on her way out.

‘*Who was that!?*’ Ms. Thomson asked indignantly, crossing her arms over her translucent chest.

“My sister.” I sighed as I reached for the mortuary putty. Her lips were a little sunken in and could use some fluffing up.

‘*She’s kind of a dick,*’ Ms. Thomson observed, and the corner of my mouth quirked up.

“Well... at least that’s one thing we can agree on,” I replied, pressing the putty under her lips. “Her bark is worse than her bite, though. She has a good heart.”

The spirit scoffed, and I chuckled.

“Now, can you try to be quiet for a few minutes? This next step is a little tricky; the color of your dress will be the least of your worries if I don’t tap your carotid artery correctly...”

6



Cal Walker

The kid shocked the shit out of me and strolled right into a fucking funeral home.

The fuck?

“Why do you think he’s going in there?” Naomi wondered out loud, and I threw the car in park. Leaning over her slightly, I slid my Ray-Bans down my nose and eyed the large building through the passenger window.

“Jesus. This place is creepy as fuck,” I muttered.

This funeral home wasn’t like the ones I was used to seeing. This was clearly privately owned and was built into a massive Victorian-style house. The exterior was painted a deep phthalo green, and the large bay windows were trimmed in black. Steep gabled roofs gave the whole building serious ‘haunted mansion’ vibes, and I cocked my head to the side in awe.

I fucking loved it.

What a dope fucking building. Whatever asshole found this place and thought, ‘Hey, let’s cram it full of dead bodies,’ was a fucking *genius*.

“I’m going in,” I announced, and my sister burst out laughing before she realized I was being serious.

“What do you mean you’re going in? You’re going to stick out like a sore thumb. Look at you!”

I glanced down at my Benny Benassi T-shirt and faded black hoodie before glancing back up at her.

“What do you mean? Aren’t you supposed to wear all black to funerals? I’ll fit right in.”

“You’re ridiculous,” she chided, though she was grinning.

“Whatever, it’ll be fine. It’s open to the public, right? I’ll just pretend I’m shopping for Cassandra’s urn for when she inevitably dies from that giant stick she has shoved up her-”

“Okay, GO! Jesus, Cal.” Naomi chuckled, pinching the bridge of her nose. “Get out of here before I tell Cass you’re talking shit about her behind her back again.”

I grinned and dropped a kiss on her cheek. “Be right back, little gnome. Lock the doors, and don’t talk to strangers.”

“You’re—”

“Ridiculous, I know,” I finished her sentence for her as I got out of the car, slamming the door shut behind me.

I pulled my hood up, shoved my hands in my pockets, and strode past the wrought iron fence and up to the outrageous double doors that led into the entrance of the building.

The windows were frosted glass, and my hands closed around brass handles. There was a sign that read ‘Fairview Funeral Services’ in tasteful gold lettering. I felt my lip curl up at the sight of it.

I was obsessed with this place. It was so fucking creepy. A Halloween-themed rave in a house like this would be fucking *sick*.

I busted through the front doors to find myself standing in a grand entrance hall with high ceilings, wooden floors, and a large chandelier. The walls were decorated with rich, dark wood paneling and antique wallpaper.

There was a wooden staircase with an ornate banister leading to the upper floors. The main hall had plush, vintage furniture, including dark leather chairs and a large wooden desk.

Tasteful floral arrangements and framed portraits were placed throughout. The reception area featured a guest book on a polished wooden table, and I wandered over to it, soaking in my creepy ass surroundings.

“Badass...” I breathed, turning in a slow circle as I walked. I was so taken with this morbid place that I had nearly forgotten I was supposed to be looking for the kid.

“He’s going to be busy for the next few hours. Go wait for him in the living room.”

My head snapped up to the aggressive voice that floated down the hallway. I narrowed my eyes at the attractive man who had an ironclad grip on the boy I had followed into this creepy house.

The man had chestnut hair tied back in a bun. He was wearing expensive gym shorts and a dri-fit top. I usually made a point not to drool over potential marks, but this dude was hot as *fuck*. If he was the one hurting this little boy, which I somewhat suspected from the way he was manhandling him, I would need to make sure I had the element of surprise. He was clearly ripped... and not in a showy way... in a *functional* way.

I was still bigger than him. If I were to guess, I would clock this guy in at six-two, and I was six-four the last time I checked. There was no doubt in my mind I could kick his ass in a fight, but why waste energy when you can just pounce on ‘em from behind?

I moved to follow the two of them through the mahogany swinging door the man was currently shoving the kid through, but man-bun turned around and slammed his hand into my chest at the last second.

He turned dark, angry eyes on me, giving me a judgemental up and down before curling his lip in distaste. I realized with a start that I wasn’t dealing with a *he* but an insanely jacked *she*.

Down boy. I scolded my semi-hard dick as the realization washed over me. *Wrong gender... and from the looks of her, she ain’t interested in what we have to offer anyway...*

“Only authorized personnel are allowed past this point,” she snapped, and I raised an eyebrow at her, eyeing her over the rims of my Ray-Bans, which were still perched on the tip of my nose.

“That kid is personnel?” I asked. The woman frowned.

“What? No... he’s—”

“Is he *your* kid?” I asked bluntly. Sometimes, just getting straight to the point gave me all the information I needed.

Muscles looked shocked for a moment, and then her angry scowl returned.

“No, he’s my brother’s... you know what? This is none of your business. Who are you? What are you doing here? We don’t have any services today.”

I shrugged. “I’m shopping for an urn,” I explained, and Muscles narrowed her eyes at me.

“Well, you’ll have to come back tomorrow. My brother’s busy, and I don’t deal with shit like that.”

So the kid must live here then if this chick’s brother was the kid’s dad and he ran the place.

I held up both hands in surrender, giving this asshole chick a grin she didn’t deserve.

“Sound’s good, man. I’ll swing by again tomorrow.” I smirked, and she crossed her arms over her firm chest, watching me with that same hostile look.

She was standing directly in front of the door the kid had gone through, and she obviously wasn’t going to budge until I was safely out of the building.

I turned and made my way back out the way I had come. Usually, I preferred to have a conversation with the child to make sure I had the right target, but that asshole had been pretty clear who the kid’s father was.

Resolving to come back after dark to do some more recon, I slid back into the driver’s seat of my Bentley. I needed a *little* more evidence that this chick’s brother was for sure the one hurting this kid, but that shouldn’t be too hard to get. I would bring Naomi home and pack my car with my murder shit, then be back here lickety-split.

Maybe if I killed that asshole and the house went on the market, I could buy it and throw that Halloween rave I had been fantasizing about... though I assumed the angry muscle lady would likely have something to say about that. I supposed I could always just kill her too...

Hmm. Something to think about.



Cal Walker

Alexa, play: Too Good - Able Heart

I found myself back at my new favorite house several hours later. This time, I had switched out the sunglasses for my skull bandana. I had it tugged up over the lower half of my face in case they had exterior cameras.

I could have taken the time to investigate and disable any cameras, but realistically, if I ended up murdering this guy, I could just do that later. I was getting that twitchy itch that tended to creep up if I went too long without murder or a good fuck, and I was getting anxious to just get to the act itself.

Murder and sex were more or less interchangeable for me. I could go without one but not the other, and since I had stopped partying so frequently, I had been finding it more difficult to come across willing assholes to sink my dick into.

Because, in case you haven't figured it out yet, assholes were my preference. I had tried pussy a few times because, let's be serious, I'll fuck anyone if I'm rolling on molly. However, the older I got, the more I realized I had a pretty complicated relationship with women. One that didn't translate well into sex.

The only relationships I had with women were with my fucked up mother and my two precious sisters, neither of which really gave me '*let's get naked*' vibes.

It was too common for me to be hooking up with a girl, then blink and suddenly find my demon-ass mother looking up at me. The first time that happened, I had almost killed the poor girl.

Cass had made me go to therapy after that. Turns out I suffer from PTSD, and my triggers become more volatile when I'm aroused.

I think I would have identified as bi if I didn't have so much emotional trauma around women. So, for the time being, I was going with gay, and that was just A-OK with me.

I loved fucking dudes. There was just something about bending over a pretty alpha male and making him see Jesus through his asshole. Nothing got me off faster than a good ol' fight for dominance that ended with me *literally* on top.

The angry muscle girl from earlier floated to the forefront of my mind as I stalked through the shadows and made my way to the back of the large funeral home.

If she had been a man, she was exactly the type of asshole I would get extreme pleasure from either murdering or fucking.

Like I said.

Interchangeable.

Wondering if I would catch another glimpse of the angry muscle woman while on my stalking adventure, I found myself peering into the warm glow of one of the back windows. She was masc enough that I wondered if I would be able to stomach a hookup without triggering myself... My dick had certainly reacted positively at the sight of her. Maybe she swung both ways.

Hmm.

There was a massive garage back here that seemed to have a guest house built on top. The garage door was open, and two *huge* hearses were parked inside.

I grinned again.

Fucking sick.

Maybe I should buy a hearse? Suddenly, my Bentley felt super boring. Scratching my chin and filing the idea away for later contemplation, I returned my attention to peeking inside the home.

This back part of the structure was decorated much differently than the public space I had entered earlier.

Everything was still done in the original Victorian architecture, but it was much less somber.

This part was clearly where the family actually lived, and it was full of handmade lace doilies and tablecloths. There was a kitchen that was all pastels with cabinets that were mint green and ruffled salmon-pink drapes.

It looked like it could star on the cover of ‘*Granny Magazine*,’ if there even was such a thing. I smirked and moved onto the next window, making sure to stay flat against the side of the house so my silhouette wouldn’t be spotted by anyone inside.

This next room was painted in a similar mint green with an accent wall done in vintage wallpaper. There was an ancient coral couch on one side, and the little kid from earlier was sitting cross-legged on the floor watching TV.

There you are. Found you.

My smile widened behind my bandana, and I leaned against the wall, settling in for the more tedious part of my hobby.

Waiting.

If you’re considering a fun and exciting career as a mercenary, let me tell you, it’s not all stabbing and killing. Most of what I do is shit like this. I camp out in my car or on rooftops, following marks around and learning their patterns and behaviors. There’s also a lot of research involved too.

Like today for example, before coming back to Fairview Funerals, I spent quite a bit of time learning everything I could about the Fairview family.

Muscles, who I had spoken to earlier, was actually named Theodora, and she was the elder of the two. Her brother, Ryan, though younger, had been the one to take over the family business when their father, George, died a few years earlier.

There was a picture of Ryan online and, let me tell you... I had been expecting the dude who ran this place to look like mother fucking *Lurch*

from the Addams family. The last thing I had been expecting was this red-headed demi-god of a man who was all biceps, stubble, and clean lines. I wasn't sure what they were injecting into the Fairview kid's genes, but they were both hot as *fuck* balls.

Which was annoying.

Especially if it turned out I *would* have to murder one of them. It kind of took sex off the table.

But alas, I would survive.

The ginger-haired sex god in question walked into the room abruptly, and my jaw literally dropped.

That picture online had *not* done him justice.

Forget muscles. I was suddenly craving a ginger snap.

He was wearing a grey 'Fairview Funerals' T-shirt that strained over his firm biceps and relaxed fit Levi's.

I gobbled up the sight of him and, much to my chagrin, my cock twitched in my pants.

I was suddenly *hella* glad I hadn't been a lazy fuck today. I had taken the extra step to strap my holster on under my hoodie instead of just jamming my gun into my waistband.

Damian *hated* it when I did that. I guess I couldn't fault him for that. He was just looking out for the well-being of my dick... which was probably a sign that he cared.

As much as I didn't like to give that asshole too much credit for anything, I was glad I had listened to his advice this time. There was only room for one weapon in my pants tonight, and apparently, that was my fucking cock.

Jesus Christ.

What did this dude *eat*?

He said something to the kid that I couldn't hear through the thick glass. The boy jumped and spun around. I frowned, my cock softening slightly.

The kid had flinched like he had been expecting to get hit.

Ryan's brow creased into a dark frown. He stepped closer to the kid, who scrambled quickly to his feet.

Ryan said something else, the expression on his face darkening further. The kid looked up at him with wide eyes and started shaking his head frantically as he backed away. Tears filled his eyes, which seemed to anger Ryan even more.

The ginger-haired man grabbed the kid by the shoulders and crouched down on his level. The boy let out a cry that I couldn't hear and jerked away from Ryan with clear pain and terror written on every line of his face.

Fat tears spilled down his cheeks, but Ryan's grip only seemed to tighten on the boy's shoulders. A vein was pulsing in his forehead, and he suddenly yelled at the boy from mere inches away.

Rage *exploded* through me, and my hand slid into my hoody of its own accord, my fingers twitching on the butt of my gun.

Hard-on officially gone.

I was going to fucking *kill this mother fucker.*

Flashbacks of my mother grabbing me like that and screaming in my face consumed me.

Devil boy! You're a stain on this world! I should kill you before you can infest mankind with Satan's plans!

With my dead mother's words echoing in my ears, I spun away before I totally lost my cool and shot the man in the head right through the window.

That was all the confirmation I fucking needed.

I would wait until the rest of the house was asleep, and then I would break in and claim my prize.

Hopefully, Ryan Fairview was enjoying his little power trip because this was *the last fucking time* he would lay a finger on that kid.

Still fuming with unbridled rage, I stalked back to my Bentley to get the rest of my murder shit.

It was going to be a fun fucking night.

8



Ryan Fairview

I was pacing in the kitchen, tapping my phone against my leg in agitation. When I finally finished up with Ms. Thomson, I went upstairs to find Caleb in the living room watching TV, just as I had expected.

What I hadn't expected was the look of pure terror in his eyes when I called his name.

I could immediately tell something was wrong...well, more wrong than normal. When I asked him why he had come over today, he flinched like he thought I was going to hit him. I asked him if someone at home was hurting him, and that totally set him off.

For a second, I was worried he was going to run away, so I grabbed him, and that's when I immediately knew my suspicions had been correct.

This boy's parents were abusing him. No one reacted like that to someone grabbing their shoulders.

At first, I thought he was just having a trauma response, but it quickly became apparent he was falling apart because he was injured beneath his shirt.

I had lost my temper... not with him, of course, but that didn't seem to matter. I yelled at him to tell me who was hurting him, and that, of course, just made things worse.

I was such a fucking idiot.

Who yells at a kid like that?

I, of course, regretted it immediately and apologized, explaining that I wasn't angry with him. I was angry with the people who had hurt him.

After that, he had thrown his arms around me and sobbed into my shoulder, scrunching up my T-shirt in his tiny fists.

Violence had never been my go-to response to confrontation, but as I held this little boy while he sobbed, all I could think about was how good it would feel to beat the shit out of the assholes that had hurt him.

I told him he could stay over if he wanted and got him set up with a room upstairs.

He was currently curled up there sleeping, which was why I was freaking out a little bit. I was pretty sure having a minor sleeping over without parental consent legally counted as kidnapping... even though it was obviously safer for him here than at his own home.

I couldn't let the kid go back. Not when I knew his parents were hurting him. I had given him a T-shirt to change into, and the bruises on the boy's chest and back were so gruesome it made *my* stomach churn... and I cut open dead bodies for a living.

I could call Child Protective Services again, but they hadn't done shit last time. What if the result was the same? What if his parents punished him for it?

I didn't think his parents knew where he was, which gave me a little bit of time to figure out a plan. At least I knew he was safe here for tonight.

I was on what felt like my hundredth anxiety-ridden lap around the kitchen table when my mother billowed in.

Because that's what my mother did, she *billowed*.

Iris Fairview was all deep red curls, silk robes, and vintage dresses. Today, she was wearing a green floral satin robe that looked like it came from a different time, with her burgundy hair piled up high on her pixie-like head.

She was willowy and delicate, and she always had a dreamy smile on her face. Nothing really ever seemed to anger my mother. She met life's

obstacles with a sort of detached optimism, as if she lived entirely in the *now* and never worried about the future or dwelled on the past.

She flowed through the kitchen towards the stove, turning the old-fashioned dial to put her nightly pot of tea on. At this late hour, she was likely brewing some homegrown chamomile from her garden.

“What has your aura so dark, dear?” she asked in her usual dreamy tone, and I slumped down into one of the white, chalk-painted kitchen chairs.

“Caleb is here. His parents are definitely abusing him. I told him to stay the night, but I don’t know what I’m going to do when they come looking for him.”

My mother turned away from the stove and leaned back against the counter, though *leaned* felt like too pedestrian of a word for what she did. She *drifted*. Like a feather settling quietly on a surface.

“I wouldn’t worry about it, honey. Your dark angel will take care of them.”

“Uh-huh,” I muttered, though I wasn’t really paying attention. I was now googling what legally counted as kidnapping in the state of Ohio.

“Not this ‘*dark angel*’ shit again,” my sister grumbled as she strolled in, texting someone on her own phone. She beelined for the fridge and popped it open, critically examining the inside. “Ryan has a girlfriend, Mom, and I would hardly consider her to be *dark*.”

“Hey, leave Joanna alone. She’s nice,” I muttered half-heartedly.

“Yes, dear... she’s *lovely*,” my mother agreed in that singsong voice of hers. “She’s just not for you.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose in frustration. “Could you two focus? We have more important things to worry about right now than my love life. There’s a little boy upstairs who’s seriously hurt, and I don’t know how to help him.”

“Ugh, you’re out of salami?” Theo asked our mother critically, completely ignoring me. I snapped my head to look at her.

“If you want salami, stock your own fridge in the guest house; that’s why we rent it to you. Stop pilfering our shit, you freeloader.”

Theo slammed the fridge shut and leaned against it, glowering at me. “Sharing your deli meat is the least you can do after you have me protecting your damn charity case all day.”

I narrowed my eyes on her. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

It was minute, but I knew my sister better than anyone. A small twinge of concern and protectiveness crossed her expression for a split second. Then she wiped it clean, giving me the angry asshole persona she liked to hide behind.

“Some scumbag came in earlier with a bullshit story about wanting to buy an urn, but he seemed more interested in the kid. I told him to kick rocks.”

“Really? What did he look like? Do you think he was Caleb’s father?” I asked. My blood went cold. If it was his dad, that meant they knew he was here. Maybe he wasn’t as safe as I had originally thought...

“I dunno. He was our age. Ripped but gave serious punk vibes. He was wearing all black and had a lip ring and a shit ton of tattoos.”

I frowned. I had been expecting some balding pot-bellied dude in a wife-beater, not someone our age... but I mean, it wasn’t outside the realm of possibility that Caleb’s dad was in his late twenties. Maybe it had been a child pregnancy...

Suddenly, there was a clatter, and the broom we kept by the back door fell to the ground.

We all turned to look at it, startled.

“What the fuck!” Theo exclaimed, looking pissed off. “I’m sick of all the freaky shit that happens in this house.”

My mother, on the other hand, was grinning like a fox.

“Broom fell. That means company is coming.” She sang, turning to tend to her now whistling teapot. Theo and I exchanged a look as she poured herself a mug. “He’s a little later than I thought he would be, but I suppose better late than never.”

“*What* are you going on about now?” Theo asked our mother, who was now rummaging through one of the drawers that I knew she stocked full of random witchy shit. She pulled out a big bag of sage and billowed over to me, putting it in front of me on the table and patting my hand fondly.

“Ryan’s dark angel, of course. Here, sweetie, you’re going to need this. Your dark angel comes with a crowd of rather...*unsavory* guests. You’re going to want to cleanse the space around him if you want any privacy.”

With that cryptic piece of advice, she swept out of the kitchen as elegantly as she had swept in.

Theo and I stared after her for a beat before my sister finally shook her head and pushed up off the fridge.

“Well, on that note, I’m going to bed.”

“What? We still haven’t discussed what we’re going to do about Caleb!” I called, but Theo was already halfway out the door.

“Who is this ‘we’ you speak of? I told you not to pick up strays. This is your problem,” she snapped, slamming the back door behind her.

I stared after her, fuming mad.

Ms. Thompson’s ghost was right. She *was* a fucking dick.

Whatever.

I snatched up the sage my mother had gifted me and made my way toward the basement. As whimsical and ‘*out there*’ as my mother may seem, I had enough experience with her strange advice to know that I would be a fool not to listen. Just because it didn’t make sense to me now didn’t mean I wouldn’t be wishing I had this sage later.

Tucking the baggie of herbs into my back pocket, I jogged down the stairs to the gym Theo built.

Maybe I couldn’t beat the shit out of Caleb’s parents for real, but I could imagine I was while pounding out some combos on the bag.

I just needed to blow off some steam and clear my head. Then the answers would come to me... That’s what I told myself, at least, as I snatched up my sister’s tape and started to wrap my knuckles.



Ryan Fairview

Alexa, Play: Animals - Maroon 5

I had never lost it on the bag so hard. My head was muddled with thoughts of Caleb and how scared he must have been when he had been forced to endure whatever beating had caused those bruises.

Hitting the bag again and again, I completely lost myself in the impact of my knuckles against my target. For the first time, I thought I could understand what Theo got out of this. For me, it was a workout, but for Theo, it was almost like boxing was therapy or some kind of *church*.

It made sense. I didn't really understand why Theo was so angry, but I could see how such an angry person would cling to this sport. It was a healthy outlet for intense emotions, and that was exactly what I needed right now.

I wasn't sure how long I had been at it, but I was covered in a thick film of sweat and regretted not taking the time to change out of my jeans when

all the hair on my body stood on end.

My next exhale came out at a cold puff, which was a telltale sign that there was a spirit close by... and not just any spirit. A malevolent one.

The more benign the being, the warmer they were. Kind spirits didn't tend to linger; they usually passed on over the course of three days.

But the bad ones? They were stubborn little fuckers. Sometimes, they didn't pass on at all and needed to be forced away.

The bag of sage my mother had given me was suddenly heavy in my back pocket, and I froze mid-swing.

I spun away from the punching bag and scanned the dark, windowless room suspiciously. The basement gym was pretty bare-bones. It was all unfinished concrete with a rack of free weights, the bag, and space for us to spar in the middle. There was a little mini-fridge where we kept bottles of Gatorade that we had always forgotten about, but other than that, this space was more or less empty.

The bare bulb that illuminated the windowless room flickered on and off, which wasn't unusual, but it certainly wasn't helping with the roll of terror suddenly coursing through my body.

To make matters worse, the more afraid I became, the harder my dick got... yeah. In case you didn't already think I was enough of a freak with the whole funeral home thing, coupled with the fact that I see dead people, I should probably mention that fear turns me on.

Pretty typical of me. It was like pulling teeth getting hard for girls in college, but if you made me fear for my life, I'm suddenly standing more erect than the Statue of fucking Liberty... go figure.

Anyway, I would talk about it in therapy if I had time to go, but I don't, so we're just going to go with good old-fashioned denial...

I eyed the pitch-black doorway that led out of the gym, and my suspicions were confirmed when the phantom of a woman staggered into the frame.

She was fucking *demonic*. Even knowing that she couldn't physically touch me, I recoiled. She had long, stringy black hair and bloodshot eyes. She was wearing a white nightgown that was stained red from the gaping gash across her neck, and she stumbled toward me on bare feet.

I patted my jeans, looking for the sage my mother had given me, and nearly cursed out loud when I realized I hadn't brought a lighter.

Idiot.

I scanned the room and felt a rush of relief when I saw a black Bic sitting on top of the mini-fridge.

Thank god.

I inched away from the phantom toward the fridge when she started laughing.

“My son is a demon, and he’s coming to kill you,” she cooed, but I ignored her. I had learned that many of the ghosts I saw, especially the evil ones, weren’t really talking to me. Most times, they were reliving whatever vile act they had been committing before they had met their untimely ends.

“Devil boy!” she screeched, lurching toward me. I dove away from her and snatched up the lighter from the fridge.

She passed right through me, and I shuddered as I struggled to get the herbs out of the bag and light it before she tried to come for me again.

Spirits couldn’t physically hurt you, but if they passed through you enough times, you could get sick. I had theorized that it had something to do with them lowering your core body temperature enough that you became susceptible to things like the flu.

She passed through me twice more before I finally got the sage lit. She hissed and staggered back just as more phantoms began to crawl into the room.

What... the... fuck?

Two... three... *four* phantoms began to stagger in through the door to the gym. I waved my lit bushel of sage at them, making them screech and back away.

I’d never seen so many spirits at once before, especially not so many *malevolent* ones... and I lived in a funeral home.

What the hell was going on?

Suddenly, a man stepped into the flickering light that bled out of the exposed bulb hanging in the center of the room. Don’t ask me how I could tell he was a man and not a spirit. Chalk it up to experience. Once you knew what you were looking for, it was like an instinct, telling apart the living and the dead.

This man was massive. I wasn’t a short guy, and he had at least two inches on me. His broad shoulders were draped in the heavy cotton of a black hoodie, and his matching jeans were slim fit and ripped at the knees. He had scuffed combat boots laced up at his ankles and a bandana with a skeleton mouth pulled up over his nose. Piercing brown eyes slammed into

mine, and his mop of dark hair swept across his forehead in thick, soft waves.

His hostile gaze fell to the sage stick I was currently brandishing like a weapon, and he cocked his head to the side in a strangely endearing way.

What the fuck, Ryan? This man is an intruder! You should be fucking running for your life!

But I couldn't. I was frozen in place. Maybe I was in shock? What was this man doing in my house? And even more importantly... why the fuck did he have, like, *twenty* ghouls hanging off of him like demonic Christmas ornaments?

Of course, the man didn't seem to know that he was dragging a gaggle of ghouls around with him, but they were there. Stroking him, wrapping their hands around his throat and wrists as if they could drag him down to hell with them.

What had he done to piss them all off so much?

"Your little burning stick isn't going to save you, ginger snap."

"What?" I asked dumbly.

The stranger's eyes were burning with a rage that I didn't understand.

"You want to hurt little kids?" he growled, taking a step toward me, and I frowned, instinctively taking a matching step back.

"Hurt little kids?" I asked, reaching behind me to put the herbs down on top of the mini-fridge.

"You think I don't know what you did to that little boy?" the man snarled.

Little boy? Was he talking about Caleb?

"Dude, you have it all wrong. I didn't—"

But he didn't let me finish. He lunged for me, and I reflexively found myself on the balls of my feet. He didn't waste time with a one-two; he came in hard with a three-two-three, and I was barely able to block him.

His cross was devastating. If it had connected, I had no doubt I wouldn't have gotten back up.

Jesus Christ.

I took on the immediate defensive. I dodged, blocked, and only retaliated when I was *sure* I would connect. The first punch I landed was a face shot, and it barely seemed to phase him. If anything, it seemed to egg him on more.

What the actual fuck was happening right now?!

The only positive in this situation was that the sage my mother had given me had burned enough to fill the small, concrete room, forcing the phantoms back out the door. It was just me and the intruder in the gym now, which made it easier to concentrate.

For someone so tall, he was lightning fast. I ducked out of the way, barely missing a left hook, just in time to catch his right directly to my gut. It winded me, and I buckled.

No. No, no, no.

This wasn't like sparring with Theo. Something told me I would lose more than this fight if I let this man overpower me.

I would be losing my life.

Of course, the second that thought shot through my fucked up brain, my traitorous body kicked into high gear, and I felt myself harden in my jeans.

For fuck's sake...

Not only was I going to be murdered at twenty-seven in my own house, I was going to die with a goddamned fear-boner.

Great.

Why am I like this?

With the humiliating prospect of giving a whole new meaning to the term *rigor mortis*, I found a second wind.

My mind went blank, and I unleashed a relentless stream of jabs that took my attacker by surprise. He tried the same combo that had taken me out before, but I saw it coming this time and blocked him with an effortlessness that surprised me.

His eyes flashed in what looked strangely like amusement, and he barked out a laugh as my next right hook connected with his cheekbone.

"Why are you laughing?" I snarled. "You like to fucking lose?"

"I just wasn't expecting you to be this much fun, ginger snap," he commented, leaning back to dodge another hook.

"You think this is fun?!" I snarled, and my attacker laughed again. The sound was deep and guttural.

"The most fun I've had all week, actually," he replied mildly. Fucker didn't even sound winded.

Suddenly, he ducked under my assault and snatched me up in a front chokehold.

He forced me back against the wall, squeezing my throat so hard I saw stars. My traitorous dick hardened even more as I clawed at his wrists.

Terror was rushing through me. I was fucked if I couldn't get out of this. I tried to remember what Theo had taught me about getting out of chokeholds.

Stay calm. Breathe.

Create space.

I stopped struggling and focused on the man's body.

I tucked my chin and forced it between his hands and my throat, giving myself room to breathe. He growled in frustration and pressed against me more firmly. His groin rubbed against mine, and we both froze as it suddenly became painfully obvious that I was nursing a raging hard-on.

Time seemed to stop.

As if he wanted to check to make sure he wasn't imagining it, he ground his pelvis into my erection, and a choked groan escaped my lips.

His fingers spasmed around my throat, and he leaned forward, his bandana tickling my ear.

"Hard for me, ginger snap?" he purred. My entire face flushed red with humiliation as he tightened his grip on my neck. "Too bad I don't fuck child abusers. I hope you carry those blue balls all the way to hell."

Of everything this asshole could have said to me, that was the wrong thing. I had come down here absolutely *tortured* over what had been done to Caleb. To be accused of being the one to hurt him?

Fuck that.

I wasn't dying with *anyone* believing that. Especially not this asshole.

I brought my knee up and clipped him in the groin. He roared in rage and reared back, but his bandana slipped down, exposing his face to me.

Fuck.

If I thought he was going to kill me before, there was no chance I was surviving now. I had seen his face!

Fuck fuck fuck!

His full lips pressed into a firm, angry line, his brown eyes boiling with liquid fire.

"You keep saying that! I didn't hurt Caleb! His asshole family hits him. This is a safe space. I would never hurt a child," I snapped.

I wound up, getting ready to deliver a lead uppercut that would have put fucking Tyson on his ass, when my attacker suddenly pulled a goddamn handgun out of his sweater and pointed it at my forehead.

I froze, holding my hands up in immediate surrender. That's when it occurred to me that while I had thought I was fighting for my life, this had always just been a game to him.

I was never going to win this. My fate was entirely dependent on whether or not this intruder decided I should live or die, and nothing about that felt fair at all.

"On your knees, ginger snap. Then you're going to tell me everything you know about Caleb. If I find out you're lying, I'll blow your brains out all over this sad, pathetic room you call a gym."

OceanofPDF.com



OceanofPDF.com

10



Cal Walker

What a *mess*.

A hot mess... don't get me wrong...But still a *mess*.

I currently had a *raging* hard Ryan Fairview on his knees before me at gunpoint, and I would be lying if I said I was looking anywhere other than his dick.

I have to say, this was the first time someone had ever gotten hard for me while I tried to kill them, but I wasn't complaining.

Something about that was so hot. What else would make this little psycho hard?

Fuck.

Focus, Cal.

I couldn't think about that yet. First, I needed to make sure what he had just said was true.

He said he hadn't been the one to hurt the boy, Caleb... but that's exactly what someone who got caught hurting a kid would say... right? So *why did I believe him?*

He wasn't giving me 'guy saying whatever he had to in order to survive' vibes.

He was giving me 'I'm offended that you would even think that. I'm a good person, and that accusation totally fucks with my own personal code of morals' vibes.

However, I was partially convinced that I was thinking with my cock at this point. Let's be serious. I wanted it to be true. He was so fucking delicious.

His dick was *so fucking hard* in his jeans, and I sucked my lip ring into my mouth as I eyed his considerable bulge. The way his entire face had flushed when I called him out for getting hard for me... Did he blush like that everywhere? Did his balls get all rosie and pink too?

I wanted to find out.

Murder or sex, murder or sex...

Fuck. Me.

I was clearly all fucked up.

I clicked the safety off on the gun and pressed it flush against his forehead. He groaned, and I couldn't tell if it was from sheer terror or from the fact that fear clearly turned him on.

Jesus Christ.

Now I was fucking hard too.

This was definitely the most fucked up hit I had ever done.

Yep.

Maybe I needed a vacation...

"I didn't hurt the kid," Ryan was saying. I shook my head, snapping myself out of my dazed state.

"Prove it," I snarled. Hot as he was, it didn't matter. If he was someone who hurt kids, he had to fucking go. I wasn't exactly a white knight, but kids? They needed someone to fight for them. No one had fought for us.

"I swear. He's sleeping upstairs. You can ask him. I think he comes here because his parents hurt him and he needs a safe place to go. I've never turned him away, and I never will. I'm currently trying to figure out what to do next. I can't send him home to those monsters, but legally, he can't stay here."

I crouched down without removing the barrel of my gun from Ryan's forehead.

His breaths were short and ragged. I could catch small hints of mint on his breath, and honestly, it smelled so fucking good. That, coupled with the damp, masculine scent of his sweat, mixed in with the clean laundry smell of his T-shirt, had me reeling.

Fucking shit I hoped he was telling the truth...

"So you're not his dad?" I asked, cocking my head to the side. Ryan let out a breathy laugh.

"Fuck no. I don't have any kids."

Yet.

Visions of little ginger babies danced before my eyes, and I blinked.

Woah. Where the hell had *that* come from?

I shook my head again and stood up, jerking the gun toward the door.

"Take me to him. If his story lines up with yours, we'll discuss the next steps."

Ryan eyed me with a look that bordered on disbelief, though he didn't say anything. He just stumbled to his feet.

"Hands behind your head. If you fucking *flinch* the wrong way, I blow your brains out all over your spooky stairs and leave it for muscles to clean up tomorrow."

He shot me a questioning look, and I shrugged.

"Your sister."

He nodded as if to say 'ah' and did exactly as he was told.

"Can we uh... bring the sage?" he asked, and I raised an eyebrow at him.

"No, weirdo. March!" I jabbed him in the back with my Beretta, and he sighed before obeying.

My cock twitched again.

Maybe he was telling the truth?

My blood heated in my veins at the thought... If he was, what would I do?

He had seen my face... Damian would tell me to kill him. He was a loose end.

However, watching him walk up the stairs before me with his hands laced behind his head, I knew I wouldn't kill him. If the kid corroborated his story, I would let Ryan Fairview live. However, I couldn't just let him loose into the world. I would need to keep an eye on him.

Looking around the impressive Victorian house that this man's family had turned into a funeral parlor, an idea hit me.

What did a mercenary and a mortician have in common?

Dead. Fucking. *Bodies*.

The more I thought about my new idea, the more excited I became.

I jabbed Ryan between the shoulder blades with my gun, forcing him to walk up the stairs faster.

"Hurry up, ginger snap. Let's get this misunderstanding cleared up so we can be friends."

He glared at me over his shoulder, and I smirked back.

"What makes you think I want to be friends with you?" he whispered back, and I chuckled.

"Trust me, ginger snap. I'm a much better friend than an enemy."

OceanofPDF.com



Cal Walker

I kept my gun rammed in between Ryan's shoulder blades the entire walk to the kid's room. The house was dark and so quiet you could have heard a pin drop, and I leaned in close to my captive's ear as we walked, resisting the urge to inhale his intoxicating scent.

Sage and clean laundry.

Normally, I wasn't into incense and crap like that, but for some reason, on this guy, the heady smoke from those herbs was doing all the right things to me.

God, I hoped he was telling the truth.

I wanted to fuck him so bad.

"How much farther?" I growled into Ryan's ear, and my cock throbbed as I noticed the flesh on the side of his neck pebble beneath my breath.

"He's just in here," Ryan whispered back to me. I prodded him in the back with my gun hard enough that he stumbled forward.

"Hurry the fuck up. I don't have all night."

That was a lie. I did have all night. Killing him had literally been my only plan, but I was getting anxious. I usually didn't spend this long with a mark... and if I had really fucked up so bad that Ryan actually *wasn't* the right guy... well, I needed to know as soon as possible so I could figure out what the fuck I was going to do with him.

Ryan quietly pushed one of the ancient wooden doors on the second floor open to reveal a tiny figure curled up in the middle of a large Victorian bed.

Moonlight was spilling in through one of the large bay windows and bathing the child in a silvery glow.

He looked so peaceful sleeping that I almost didn't want to wake him up.

"I'm going to put my gun away so I don't scare the kid, but if you try *anything*, I will fucking kill you and your cranky ass sister too. Do you understand what I'm saying, ginger snap?" I growled into his ear, resisting the urge to pull the soft, fleshy lobe into my mouth.

Jesus. Why was I so hot for this fucking guy?

Ryan nodded, and I shoved my gun back into the holster under my hoodie.

Creeping forward, I sat on the edge of the bed and shook the boy gently.

"Hey... hey Caleb, wake up," I whispered softly. The boy rolled over to face me, rubbing his eyes sleepily. He was so groggy and clearly needed sleep. I remembered how hard it had been to sleep sometimes when I had been locked in that fucking cage. I would get so cold, and my mom never gave us blankets or pillows. The first time Damian had let me sleep in a real bed, I had slept like a fucking *rock*.

"Who are you?" Caleb asked, his small child's voice barely a whisper. I gave him one of my more charming smiles.

"I'm a friend of Ryan's," I said. Ryan made a quiet scoffing sound that I ignored, though my lips twitched on their own accord. "I have to ask you some questions, and it's really important that you tell me the truth, even if it's hard to talk about. Can you do that for me, Caleb?" I asked, keeping my voice quiet and soft.

The little boy glanced nervously over my shoulder at Ryan, who must have given him an encouraging motion because when he turned back to me, he nodded.

"Okay."

“Was Ryan the man who hurt you?”

The kid’s eyes widened in shock, and he shook his head. “N-no. Ryan would never hurt me. He’s my friend. He said I could stay here so I don’t have to go back.”

My heart fucking *leapt* in my chest at the confirmation that Ryan wasn’t this kid’s abuser. I don’t think I’ve been this outrageously happy since the first time I tasted fuzzy peaches, which, next to the day we escaped my mom’s house, was still probably one of the best days of my life.

Fucking was officially back on the table!

Unable to contain my shit-eating grin, I glanced back over at Ryan, who was fidgeting awkwardly and flinching like something was hurting him.

My smile faded, and I frowned.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” I asked, and he shot me a distressed look. He was paler than he had been after our fight, and he definitely wasn’t hard anymore.

“I wish you would have let me bring up the sage,” he replied, flinching again.

What was with the damn sage?

Now I feel bad. He clearly needed it for some reason. He looked *really* uncomfortable.

“We can go get it after this,” I offered, and he gave me an odd look, like the idea of us doing anything after this together was ludicrous.

Silly little ginger snap. We would be doing all kinds of things together after this... he just didn’t know it yet.

“Ryan... are you okay?” the boy asked, and my frown deepened as Ryan did another strange little tap dance. It looked as if he were swatting away a fly.

I glanced back at Caleb, who was biting his lip in concern, before turning back to my distressed captive.

“Alright, kid. I’m going to take him back to get his sage. Go to sleep, but we’re going to have to talk some more in the morning. You’re going to need to tell me where you live.”

Caleb nodded, still staring at Ryan with concern. “Okay,” he agreed, and I got up to leave.

“Let’s go get your herbs, ginger snap. You’re stressing me out,” I muttered, gesturing for him to lead the way. He shot me something close to a grateful look before hurrying back down the stairs. I followed him, still

confused as fuck as to why he was freaking out so much. He hadn't acted this way when I spied on him through the window.

We made it back to the little shitty room that I had found him practicing in, and he practically sprinted to the bushel of sage I had made him leave on top of the mini-fridge.

I leaned against the door frame and watched as he fumbled with a Bic lighter.

His hands were violently shaking, and he couldn't seem to get the stupid thing lit.

"Here, let me do it," I offered. He genuinely seemed panicked, and honestly, he was so pale I was starting to worry he might pass out.

I moved to take the lighter from him, but he jerked away from me, turning wide but angry eyes on me.

"Stay away!" he shouted, and I took a step back, holding my hands up to show I didn't mean him any harm.

"I just want to help. You're shaking," I said calmly, as if I were talking to a frightened animal.

"I don't need your help. I need you to get the fuck off my property," he snapped as he finally got the lighter to work. The second he had the herbs burning again, he seemed to relax. He slumped against the concrete wall and leaned his head back against it, letting out a shaky breath.

Guess we were resting for a bit.

I perched on the edge of the mini-fridge and watched him as he took deep breaths in through his nose and out from his mouth.

His T-shirt was drenched with sweat, but I didn't think it was from our fight. He looked cold and clammy, like he had suddenly caught a bad bug. I cocked my head to the side, frowning.

So he got fear boners and panic flu? Was that a real thing?

"What's with the sage?" I finally asked, and he opened his eyes to glare at me. I grinned at him.

"Why are you still here?" he growled, and I shrugged.

"Not quite done with you yet, ginger snap. Besides, you look like you might pass away at any moment. It feels irresponsible to leave you down here all alone."

"Stop calling me that."

"You don't like ginger snap? I thought it was cute."

“It’s. Not. *Cute*. You’re a fucking intruder! You attacked me with a *gun!*”

“Yeah, but that was *before*. I thought you were a child abuser. Now that I know you’re not, we can be friends like I said.”

“I don’t want to be your friend! You’re a criminal!” he snarled, though his voice was sounding weak.

I let out a sigh. “Listen. Even if I wanted to leave you alone, I can’t. You’ve seen my face. My boss is not going to be happy about that. He’s going to want me to off you.”

Whatever remaining blood Ryan had in his face emptied out. He was literally as white as a sheet of paper. Even his freckles seemed to have faded.

“Hey, don’t worry. I don’t want to do that,” I tried to reassure him, but he was fully panicking now and stumbling away from me again, shaking his head.

“Get out of my house!” He was yelling, and his eyes had gone blank. I knew that look. He was in full fight or flight. There was no way I could have a productive conversation with him while he was like this.

Guilt swirled in my gut. Now that I knew he was innocent, I didn’t want him to be afraid of me. I often forgot that most people didn’t wake up every day thinking that there was a real possibility they might die.

I had been living like that since I was a child. Death didn’t scare me. If anything, I thought of myself as the harbinger of death, and when my time came, I would greet the reaper like an old friend.

I imagined death would be peaceful, and god knows my life had been anything *but* peaceful. In my imagination, death would feel like going on a permanent vacation.

Looking at the pale and panicking Ryan Fairview, I realized he did *not* feel the same way. The idea of dying terrified him, and I had accidentally given him the impression that I would be the one to take his life away.

Oopsie.

“Alright, alright,” I said calmly, getting up from where I had been perched on the mini-fridge. I backed slowly away from Ryan. “I’ll go, but I’ll be back in the morning, so don’t freak out next time you see me. I promise I’m not coming back to kill you. We just need to talk.”

“Get out!” he yelled, reaching behind him to grab a dumbbell off the rickety rack against the far wall. He brandished it at me like it was a

weapon, and I sighed but nodded.

“See you in the morning, ginger snap,” I muttered on my way out. “Try to get some rest. You look awful,” I called over my shoulder before slipping up the stairs and out of the house.

I couldn’t shake the anxious feeling in my chest that I shouldn’t have left him there while he was that upset. However, I had clearly just been making the situation worse.

‘He would feel better in the morning,’ I told myself as I climbed into my Bentley. He just needed some rest.

OceanofPDF.com

12



Ryan Fairview

When the intruder left, he took his ghouls with him. I was a fucking mess. That horrible woman had passed through me so many times I had lost count. I was freezing and could barely feel my fingers by the time I was able to crawl into a hot shower.

Keeping the sage burning in the bathroom with me, the space became so full of steam and smoke that it soon became difficult to breathe, but I didn't care.

I stood under the steady beat of the boiling hot water until my head felt clear again and my body stopped shaking.

What the fuck had just happened?

By the time I got out of the shower and made my way to my bedroom, the earlier events of the night felt like a fever dream.

Had I really just been held at gunpoint?

Who was that man?

Why did he think I had been abusing Caleb?

Who did he work for?

I pulled on a soft pair of grey drawstring pants and made my way to my antique California King. My mother had insisted on me moving into the main bedroom on the second floor after my father had passed.

She said it was too much space for her, and since I had taken over the business, it was time for me to make the Fairview house my home. I had resisted at first. My childhood room was fine. I rarely spent time in it anyway, but she had insisted.

'You'll need the extra space when your dark angel arrives.' She had said cryptically. So I moved in. The bedroom was set at the front of the house and had massive bay windows and more floor space than anyone really needed in a bedroom.

The furniture was heavy and ornate, all made of a dark black walnut. The walls were covered in deep green antique wallpaper, and the ensuite bathroom was probably one of the most up-to-date parts of the house.

We had it redone a few years ago after the shower had sprung a leak, and Iris had gone full modern goth on the design.

There was a big, black, clawfoot tub that I never used and a walk-in shower with a rain head.

I had to admit, I was grateful for the extravagant fixtures tonight. Thankfully, I was able to get my core body temperature up relatively quickly. I may be able to avoid the aching sickness that usually comes after encounters like that.

However, I had never before had an encounter quite *that* bad. That man must be a fucking *murderer*. Why else would he have so many ghouls crawling all over him?

I shuddered as I climbed into bed.

I knew I should call the police, but I felt like shit, and I didn't want them to find Caleb here.

'See you in the morning, ginger snap,' he had said before he left. Was I delusional to hope that he had just said that to scare me? Maybe he wouldn't come back.

'You've seen my face.'

Fuck.

I should really call the police... but I couldn't bring myself to do it. My eyes were suddenly so heavy, and my bones literally *ached*.

I just needed to close my eyes for a minute... then I could figure out what to do when I was feeling better.



WAKING UP THE NEXT DAY WITH THE SUN SPILLING THROUGH THE BAY window, it was easy to pretend that I had imagined the night before.

In the light of day, the horror show of being attacked in my own home by some man who had just felt the right to let himself in felt like a fever dream.

I was feeling almost 100% better. The faint headache I was nursing was really the only evidence that I had been repeatedly violated by that phantom woman.

Although the man had several ghouls stalking him, she had by far been the most violent.

'Demon boy! You're a stain on this earth!'

Considering the man she was screaming about had broken into my house and held me at gunpoint, I was inclined to agree with her.

Getting out of bed, I got to my feet and stretched, running a hand down my face. My clock said six a.m., which was a pretty typical time for me to start my day. But I was usually the only one who got up this early.

Mornings were my favorite part of the day because of how quiet they were. I was a true introvert by nature, so I treasured the hour or so of solitude before the rest of the house woke up.

Days where we hosted services and funerals, while rewarding, were exhausting for me. I often wished I had a partner who was more outgoing than myself to help with that part of the business. My father had been *excellent* with people. I did my best, but like I said, my social battery often drained before the work was done. It just would be nice to share that load with someone.

Thankfully, we didn't have anything scheduled today. Ms. Thompson's service was set for tomorrow so I could take some time to try to figure out what to do about both Caleb and the home invasion I had just suffered.

What a fucking mess.

I slipped out of my room and down the hall to Caleb's room. The boy was still sleeping soundly. I breathed a sigh of relief.

The one good thing about everything that happened the night before was that I truly didn't think the child was in danger from that man. He had

seemed obsessed with his well-being. My safety, on the other hand... I shuddered.

Ugh! I didn't want to deal with any of this... Why had that guy chosen my home?

I needed a strong cup of coffee.

Closing Caleb's door softly, I turned to find my mother billowing down the hall. Her long burgundy hair was in a thick, low braid, and her silk nightdress and robe combo was a butter yellow today. I raised my eyebrows at her in surprise.

"You're up early," I observed, and she gave me a dreamy smile.

"The house notified me that we have a visitor. I'm anxious to meet him." She chimed, and my mood immediately soured.

She wasn't talking about that man, was she? Was he already back?!

"Mom, stay up here. Maybe we should call the police. I need to tell you about last night, there was an intruder, he broke in and—"

"The *police*? Nonsense honey. Don't be rude." She brushed me off and began floating down the large front stairwell, her fingers lightly tracing the banister as she went.

I let out a frustrated growl. "You're not listening to me! It might not be safe. He said he was coming back, and he had a gun!"

Iris completely ignored me and continued to drift through the front entrance of the house toward the swinging door that led to the kitchen. She was humming 'Angel Baby' by Rosie and the Originals as she walked, and I had a sudden moment of clarity.

She didn't think the man that had attacked me was the 'dark angel' she had been going on about since I was a child... Did she?

I barreled after her into the kitchen, and my heart dropped. My gaze immediately fell on the guy from the night before.

He was sprawled in one of the chalk-painted kitchen chairs with his combat boots crossed on the table in front of him.

He looked up from his phone with a giant smile on his face, which widened as his brown eyes drifted over my body.

I felt my entire face turn red as he leisurely took in every inch of me, and I suddenly regretted not putting on a shirt before coming downstairs.

His tongue skated over his bottom lip, and he nibbled on his lip ring before meeting my gaze head-on, an unmistakable heat permeating from his eyes.

“Morning, ginger snap. How did you sleep?”

My mouth fell open, and I gaped at him as my mother drifted by, making a beeline for the stove.

“Feet off the table, dear; the house doesn’t like that.” She reprimanded the stranger as if she had known him all her life.

With what seemed to be a great deal of effort, he peeled his eyes away from mine to look at my mother. An amused and almost good-natured grin cocked on the side of his full lips, and he slid his feet off the table, spinning around in the chair so he was straddling it. He crossed his arms over the back of the chair, giving my mother his full attention.

“Sorry, Mrs. Fairview,” he said politely, following her lead and acting like they knew each other.

“Don’t apologize to *me*, dear. It’s the house you have to answer to.” She put a pot of hot water on and turned around, giving him a dreamy smile. “You’re late, by the way. I was expecting you weeks ago.”

That amused smile on the stranger’s face grew wider, and he sent me a look as if to ask: *Do you know what she’s talking about?*

I didn’t like him looking at me like that. Like we were on the same team. I waited for him to make fun of my mother or say something mean about her strangeness, but instead, he gave her a warm smile and nodded.

“Sorry. Usually, I’m pretty punctual. Not sure what happened there.”

She patted his arm affectionately and returned his smile. “No matter. You’re here now; that’s what counts.” She frowned and glanced around the kitchen as if looking for something. “It seems your entourage hasn’t followed you today.” She reached into the pocket of her robe and pulled out a little velvet drawstring pouch.

“Please carry this on you when you’re spending time with my son. He’s a sensitive boy, and the herbs are not very practical, especially outside the house.”

The stranger took the pouch from her curiously and peeked inside, cocking his head to the side before stuffing it diligently into the front pocket of his jeans.

“Sure thing, Mrs. Fairview.” He grinned at her amicably, and she gave him an approving smirk before floating back to attend to her tea.

I was fucking *furious*.

What the fuck was happening right now? This man had broken into my house! Again! The audacity! And he was just sitting here in my kitchen

chit-chatting with my mother like he belonged here?

I scanned him over, trying to see if he was carrying a gun again. I couldn't tell if he was, not that I was an expert, but he seemed to be unarmed.

He was wearing a similar version of the outfit he had on when he had attacked me the night before: black jeans with clunky combat boots laced at the ankles. He was wearing a black hoodie that said '*Don't bully me, I might come*' in big red letters.

His mop of black hair was thick and healthy. Despite the fact that I wanted to hate him, even I could admit the man was good-looking. It was easy to see he was heavily muscled beneath the large black hoodie. He was tanned too, and his hands and neck were covered in black tattoos.

If I had to guess his age, I would say late twenties. He could have easily been an underwear model or something if he wasn't spending his evenings attacking innocent people in their own homes.

As if he could sense me staring at him, his chocolate gaze found mine, and the corners of his eyes crinkled when he found me staring.

"You look a lot better this morning, ginger snap," he commented, and I squeezed my fists at my side.

"Can I speak to you for a moment?" I grit out through clenched teeth. It was taking everything in me not to begin screaming at him to get out of my house. However, I didn't want to upset my mother, who was still humming that old '*angel*' song while preparing what looked like three mugs of tea.

"How do you like your tea, dear?" my mother asked.

The man beamed. "With milk! No sugar. I'm sweet enough already." He winked.

Oh, hell no.

This fucker was not staying for tea. I cleared my throat, looking at the intruder expectantly.

"Excuse me? *A word, please,*" I growled.

"Of course. I'm all ears. What's up?" the man asked, seeming genuinely thrilled that I wanted to talk to him.

I scowled. "*Alone.*"

He brightened even further, leaping to his feet. I tried my best not to actively flinch at how much bigger he was than me.

"Abso-fucken-lutely." He beamed, stalking toward me. I immediately retreated from the kitchen, walking as swiftly as I could to put some

distance between us and my mother.

The second we were alone in the hall, I turned to give this asshole a piece of my mind but jumped when I found he was already crowding me.

“What are you—” I rasped as he thrust me back against the wall hard enough that one of the still life paintings rattled.

The crown molding dug into my back, and the man’s hands slid up my bare abdomen and over my chest as he pushed into me harder. His lips grazed my ear, and he released a low, rumbling sound from deep inside his chest that made my stomach flip over.

“Couldn’t wait to get me alone, baby?” he purred, and he grazed a thumb tenderly over my jaw.

“What the fuck!? Get off me!” I snarled, slamming my hands into his chest and struggling to push him away. He pulled back slightly, meeting my gaze head-on and swiping his tongue over his bottom lip. Instead of letting me go like I had asked, he wedged his leg between my knees and ground his pelvis against me.

“Awe. Come on, Ryan, don’t play hard to get. Where’s that hard-on you had for me yesterday?”

My flesh erupted in goosebumps as my first name rolled off his tongue. It was the first time he had called me Ryan, and my blood flashed cold with fear.

He knew so much personal stuff about me, but I knew nothing about him. I didn’t even know his name or what he wanted from me.

“That wasn’t about *you*, jackass. I’m straight,” I snapped, though my traitorous dick chose that moment to remind me that it was activated by fear, and this guy was scaring the shit out of me.

I felt myself swell in my soft cotton pants, and it was *insanely* obvious. I wasn’t even wearing boxers. My face flushed beet red as I realized my mistake.

Why hadn’t I gotten dressed before coming downstairs? He literally told me he was coming back in the morning!

The intruder glanced down between us, where my rock-hard cock was straining against the front of my pants, and he laughed.

He *laughed!*

“Mmmhmm. SooOOoOoo straight, mortuary boy. Maybe tell that to your boner. It seems to have missed the memo.”

“Get *off!*” I snarled.

“I plan to.” He smirked.

I shoved his chest as hard as I could. He barely budged, but he moved enough that I was able to cock my fist back and send a punch directly for his face.

He let out a surprised burst of laughter, ducking to the side and causing me to miss.

He used my own movement against me and whipped me across the hall by my wrist, effortlessly pushing me forward into the opposite wall.

I cursed as he barreled into me from behind, twisting one arm behind my back as he pushed me face-first into antique wallpaper.

He crushed his hips into me, forcing my cock to rub against the wall, and a whimper escaped my lips.

He had a hard-on now too, and he ground his dick against my ass in one long stroke before literally *nipping* my lobe.

“I like that sound,” he whispered in my ear as I struggled against his grip. He chuckled and pressed against me harder. I felt the deep rumble of his voice all the way in my bones, and I caught myself inhaling the musk of his cologne as his breath skated over the side of my neck.

My cock throbbed in response to the thrilling sense of fear that was coursing through me, causing me to groan as he ground into me again. I jerked, trying my best to kick back into his balls, but the way he had me positioned against him made it impossible. I was literally leaking in my pants, and my heart was pounding in terror at the fact that I couldn’t get him off me.

“Please,” I finally whispered, and he ran the tip of his nose up the back of my neck, his voice laced with heated amusement.

“Please what, ginger snap?” he growled, the mint on his breath feathering across my ear.

“Please, let me go,” I murmured, not wanting to struggle anymore. He was clearly getting off on it... and honestly, I was too, and it was confusing me.

“I like to hear you beg, baby. All you had to do was say please.”

Suddenly, he was gone, leaving me bereft and reeling from the abrupt absence of his touch.

I whipped around to face him, preparing to fight him off again if he came for me, but he was just watching me with a lazy smile and hooded eyes.

My skin was flush with humiliation, and his eyes roamed over my tomato-red chest before dipping down to the throbbing space between my legs. He sucked on his lip ring, shamelessly staring at my dick before palming his own over his jeans and leaning back against the opposite wall.

“That was hot, ginger snap,” he crooned, and I nearly *snarled* at him.

“Stop calling me that! Get out of my house! Who the fuck do you think you are?!”

He slid his gaze up to meet mine and gave me that crooked smile of his that I was already becoming annoyingly familiar with.

White, straight teeth flashed in the bright morning light, and I noticed how his canine pressed into his full bottom lip on one side.

“I’m Cal,” he said easily, and I sputtered in horror.

“Don’t tell me your name! I don’t want to know anything about you!” I roared. “You need to get the fuck out of here and never come back! You’re trespassing!”

He glanced around, frowning in confusion. “Isn’t this a funeral home? I thought it was open to the public.”

“It’s open to people who are customers, which you are fucking *not!*” I hissed, taking an aggressive step toward him as my anger got the better of me.

He shrugged. “Not yet... But we’re about to be business partners, you and I.” He flashed me a boyish grin, and I hated the way his smile made my stomach twist with a weird sort of excitement.

It wasn’t quite *fear* but something else. Something I had never felt before, so I was having a hard time putting a label on it.

My head was spinning.

This guy had been here for five minutes, and I was so overwhelmed and confused by him.

“That’s never going to happen,” I scoffed, and he chuckled.

“I’m afraid it is, ginger snap. I tried to tell you last night, but you weren’t feeling well. You’ve seen my face, which means you’re unfortunately a loose end, at least in the eyes of my boss.”

I froze, and he pushed up from the wall, stalking toward me. I was forced to take a step back for every step forward he took, and before I knew it, he had me cornered again.

He rested his hand on my hip and traced his thumb over the waistband of my pants. I batted him away, but he slammed his other hand into the wall

beside my head, leaning in close to my face.

“Now. Lucky for you, I like you... a *lot*. So, I don’t really have any interest in killing you. But for this to work out, you’re going to need to be willing to work with me.”

“I would never work with a *murderer*,” I snarled, and for the first time that morning, the amusement seemed to slip off his face.

I swallowed as he showed me the side of himself that I was sure he reserved for his victims. His warm brown eyes went cold and dark. My heart skipped a beat as he slid his hand up from my waist and rubbed his thumb possessively over the stubble on my jaw.

His now dead eyes seemed to look right through me, and his face was suddenly as serious as the grave.

“Never say never, Ryan Fairview,” he purred. The way he said my full name stripped away any hope I had about getting out of this.

He was showing me the truth about my situation, and the truth was that I had no choice. My life as I knew it would never be the same because if I didn’t do what this man said, I would lose my life altogether.

“Now, listen up because I’m only going to say this once. You work for me now,” Cal said, his voice low and dangerous. “If you do what I tell you, we won’t have a problem... but if you cross me, there will be severe consequences. Understand?”

I swallowed, glaring up at him with everything I had. If looks could kill, he would be a very dead man. He just chuckled and stroked my jaw again before dropping a kiss on my forehead like I was a fucking child.

“Good boy. That’s what I thought,” he purred before backing away. He grinned and gestured back toward the kitchen.

“Let’s go have some tea with your mom. Then I can tell you all about your new job.” He winked before throwing his arms over his head in a big, lazy stretch.

“Hope you like dead bodies.” He cackled, leaving me alone in the hallway.

B



Cal Walker

Jesus fucking Christ, it should be illegal to be that hot. Ryan mother fucking Fairview had my ticket, let me tell you.

His adorable little fight for dominance had me *so goddamn hard*. Ugh, I nearly gave his mom the show of her life when I walked back into the kitchen. Before going inside, I slipped my dick up into the waistband of my jeans so as not to accidentally poke her in the damn eye with it. And people say I don't have any manners.

When I re-entered the kitchen, there were two steaming cups of tea waiting for us, and Iris was drinking hers while she hummed and danced to a song that was only playing in her head.

She was making breakfast now, and my mouth watered at the smell of bacon.

"How do you like your eggs, dear?" she asked.

I assumed she was speaking to me as I was likely the only person in the house that she didn't already know the egg preference for. I snatched up my

tea and took a big sip before peeking over her shoulder to see what she was up to.

“I like ‘em over easy, but if you’re doing scrambled, I’ll take that too.” I grinned, and she beamed back at me.

I really liked this lady. She was weird as fuck. It was the best.

The little pouch she gave me was full of the most random shit. There was a shiny black stone, a sprig that smelled and looked like rosemary, and a rusty nail.

Super odd, but whatever. It didn’t bother me at all to keep it on my person the way she had asked. I liked it when people humored me with stupid shit, so I always tried to do the same for others. Especially if it was harmless and took zero effort on my part.

Ryan followed me into the kitchen, looking sullen and pissed off. It seemed I had a brat on my hands, which was literally my *favorite*. I loved it when they fought back. I got to punish them and teach them their place.

Ryan *wanted* to be good. I saw it when he finally realized he was going to lose the fight in the hallway and begged me to let him go.

I would make sure to teach him just how far begging would get him... though it did concern me that he seemed to think he was straight.

I typically stayed away from closeted dudes, mostly because I didn’t have the patience or the time for it. Usually, I was looking for a quick fuck between jobs. Coaxing someone out of the closet, especially someone as ingrained in their ways as Ryan, was usually more trouble than it was worth. But looking at his scrumptious little ass and his still half-hard dick flopping in those cotton pants that left *nothing* to the imagination... I was going to have to make an exception.

He glowered at me, clearly not liking my proximity to his mother, so I got closer to him instead.

“Here,” I said, pulling out the seat at the table with the remaining cup waiting for him. “Have a seat.” My offer seemed to anger him.

“Where do you get off offering me a seat in my own fucking house?” He snarled, and I glanced at his mother, who didn’t seem perturbed by his outburst.

“I was just trying to be nice,” I explained, but I couldn’t help chuckling when it looked like literal steam might come shooting out of his ears.

“Yeah, well... it would be *nice* if you got off my property,” he snapped, though my heart did an embarrassing little pitter-patter as he flopped into

the seat I had pulled out for him anyway.

"I'm not going anywhere, ginger snap. You better get used to it."

"Breakfast is ready!" Iris chimed.

I grinned at her, returning to her side.

"Can I do anything to help?"

"How kind, dear. Yes, please take these plates to the table. Ryan, have you heard from Theo? Is she joining us?"

My grin widened as I helped Iris set the table. Oh boy. Theo was going to lose her shit when she found me in this kitchen.

I couldn't wait.

I was just about to sit down in the seat next to Ryan when Caleb walked into the kitchen rubbing his eyes.

"Morning, bud," I greeted him, and he gave me a shy smile. Ryan shot up from the table and went to him, crouching down to get on his level.

"Hey... how did you sleep?" he asked the boy softly.

My heart swelled at the sight of it. Seeing him interact with Caleb now, I couldn't believe how much I had misinterpreted the situation the night before. I supposed Ryan had just had a bad reaction to the news that the kid had been injured. I would need to be more careful in the future. A little pulse of anxiety shot through me at the thought that I very well could have killed Ryan for no reason.

What a shame that would have been...

"I slept ok," Caleb said, his voice small.

"Do you want some breakfast? We're having scrambled eggs and bacon," Iris said, and the kid's eyes lit up.

"I love bacon!" he exclaimed, scrambling toward the table. I chuckled and pulled out a seat on the opposite side of me.

"Who doesn't?" I asked, and he wrinkled his nose up at me.

"Vegetarians."

"Ah, yep. You've got me there," I agreed, thinking of Cass and her weird tofurkey we always had to make when she came over.

Whatever. To each their own.

Ryan and Iris sat down at the table with us, though Ryan couldn't seem to take his eyes off me. He was glaring at me with such intense hostility that I could feel his gaze burning into the side of my head.

If he thought he was going to be able to scare me away with a few dirty looks, he was sorely mistaken. He was just a little kitten compared to the

assholes I usually ate with when working for Apex.

This breakfast, despite his hostility, was closer to what it was like when I shared meals with Naomi and Cass, and honestly, I was fucking loving every minute of it.

I would be inviting myself back very soon.

“See something you like, ginger snap?” I teased him, grinning as I took a bite of my eggs. He narrowed his eyes and shook his head aggressively.

“Keep dreaming, you freak,” he snarled, and I narrowed my eyes right back at him.

“Watch it. There’s a child present.” I warned, making sure he heard the threat in my voice. I was fine with him being a little grumpy raincloud, but I wouldn’t be disrespected or allow him to call me names.

I had killed people for much less.

He opened his mouth to say something else. I could tell by the expression on his face that it was going to piss me the fuck off, but luckily for him, Theo walked into the kitchen before he could get a word out.

“Someone’s here for the kid,” she growled, stalking up to the table, looking even more agitated than she had the day before. She was in the same black shorts and T-shirt combo, with her signature bun tied at the nape of her neck.

She was still hot as fuck, but decidedly less so now that I had met her brother. Theo’s angry gaze flitted to mine, and her eyebrows shot up in surprise to find me sitting at the table like a self-proclaimed member of the family. Her jaw dropped, and she rounded on Ryan.

“What the fuck is this guy doing here?” she growled, and Ryan pinched the bridge of his nose, letting out an exasperated sigh.

“It’s a long story,” he grumbled.

“Perhaps we should focus on the task at hand.” Iris piped up sagely from her end of the table. She had pulled Caleb into her lap and was stroking his hair fondly. “We seem to have a bit of a problem, and we would present a stronger front if we worked together.”

Have I mentioned that I fucken loved this lady?

The. *Best*.

I crossed my arms over my chest and smirked at the Fairview siblings, raising my eyebrows at them expectantly.

“See? Iris gets it.” I grinned.

They both looked at me like they wanted to see what I would look like with my throat cut.

Unfortunately for Ryan, that just made my dick hard.

Fortunately for Theo, it made me think she might not be a useless twat in a fight if I needed backup later.

I wouldn't... but it was definitely a point in her favor.

Caleb started crying, and the smile dropped right off my face. I stood up, giving him my full attention.

"Don't worry," I said, making sure my voice came out even and calm so as not to frighten him any more than he already was. "You're not going back."

Caleb turned his impossibly large eyes up to face me, his lower lip trembling.

"You promise?" he asked, his voice barely a whisper.

"I promise," I said before glancing at Theo.

"Is it a man or a woman?"

She pursed her lips, her dark eyes simmering with rage, but she answered me.

"A man. He's claiming neighbors saw Caleb come in here, and he's demanding we return him. He says he's his dad."

I nodded. "Alright then. Let's go meet the dead man." I grinned, not waiting to see if the Fairview siblings would follow me. I knew that they would.



Ryan Fairview

Theo and I followed Cal to the front, and our mom hung back in the kitchen with Caleb. Theo was glaring at me, and I was glaring at the back of Cal's head. It was one big chain of glares.

I was still reeling from everything that had happened. Cal hadn't given me a chance to catch my breath, and now Caleb's dad was here?

I was also pretty sure Cal had just insinuated that he was going to kill the man...what a fucking mess...

Theo stayed quiet, but I knew she was going to grill me later. Her knuckles cracked as she clenched and unclenched her fists next to me as we walked.

My sister's go-to reaction when she was feeling threatened was *always* violence. Mine wasn't, but I had already gotten into two physical altercations in less than twelve hours with this infuriating man. A fistfight between my sister and Cal was imminent, and if I was being honest, I didn't want to be around for it. It wouldn't be the first time Theo got into it with a man. It was never pretty.

Caleb's father was standing in the foyer, and I was hit with another wave of confusion.

So much for the bald-headed dude in a wife beater. This man looked polished and put together. He was wearing a well-tailored suit and had thick blond hair styled meticulously around his head.

I eyed some of the heavy rings he had on his right hand and nearly winced at the thought of him hitting Caleb with them on.

Theo's already aggressive energy darkened next to me. I heard the telltale sign of her knuckles cracking again, though this time, I could tell the anger wasn't for Cal.

All three of us stared at this man, and he was either stupid or knew something we didn't because he didn't look the least bit worried that we had come to confront him.

"Who the fuck are you?" he asked, meeting Cal's gaze. He gave Cal a condescending once over, curling his lip up at his tattoos and piercings.

I didn't like it.

"I'm the guy that's here to tell you to get the fuck out." Cal grinned at him, though his smile didn't reach his eyes.

Even when he hadn't been sure if I was Caleb's abuser, Cal hadn't looked at me the way he was staring at this man. It was like he could *sense* the sinister nature rolling off him.

"I'm not leaving without my son," the man growled, stepping toward Cal menacingly. Both Theo and I stepped forward, making a clear show that this man would need to deal with the three of us if he wanted to get to Caleb.

Cal shot me an appreciative grin, and my stomach flipped. I had no idea what to do with this strange, dark-haired man who had just shown up and invited himself into my life, but my mother was right.

For the time being, we were on the same team, and there was *no fucking way* I was letting this snake-like man take Caleb home to hurt him again.

"I told you, he's not here," Theo growled, and I didn't miss the approving glance Cal shot my sister.

"Then you won't mind me taking a look around," the man challenged.

"Nice try, asshole. Come back with a warrant. The kid's not here. Now get out," Cal drawled, stepping forward to crowd the man.

My heart was pounding in my chest.

Fuck... I really hope Cal didn't beat the shit out of this guy in the front entrance...

Caleb's dad sneered up at Cal, who was several inches taller than him. He reached into the interior pocket of his suit jacket, and I tensed, remembering how Cal had reached into his hoodie the night before only to produce a full-blown handgun.

I let out a small sigh of relief when I realized he wasn't taking out a gun but a cell phone.

"You want a warrant? I'll get you a warrant. You have no idea who you're fucking with, pal." The man snarled, but before he could put the phone to his ear, Cal snatched it out of his hand. He threw it on the ground and rammed the heel of his boot into the screen, crushing it.

My mouth fell open, and even Theo looked shocked.

Cal leaned forward and growled in the man's ear. "Hope you have a landline, *pal*. Now run home and call the police like a good little bitch."

Caleb's dad's face went red with fury. He sputtered before us in rage before pointing his finger in Cal's face angrily.

"You're going to pay for that!" he spat, and Cal sneered.

"Do you take plastic?" he cooed, pissing the guy off even more.

Caleb's dad whirled on me and my sister next, spittle literally flying out of his mouth as he yelled at us.

"You're done! You'll never work in this town again! I'll have you so fucked up on kidnapping charges you'll never see the light of day!"

Panic coursed through me, but Cal just shoved the guy out the front door. "Yeah, yeah. Say it, don't spray it, fuck hole," he chided, practically tossing the guy out the front door. Theo and I rushed forward and watched as the man hopped in his Jaguar and fired up the engine. Cal turned to us with a very scary grin on his face.

"Keep Caleb safe. I'll be back," he ordered before jogging out of the house and climbing into a murdered-out Bentley parked across the street.

Music that sounded like robots fucking suddenly exploded from the black car as Cal peeled off down the street in the same direction the Jaguar had gone.

Theo and I watched him drive away, his weird music fading with each passing minute. We both stood in a mild state of shock for a beat before my sister turned to me, her face a stony mask.

"What the fuck just happened?" she snapped as if I had the answers.

“I think we just got roped into some really messed up shit,” I grumbled, my stomach feeling like it was full of lead.

Theo turned and slammed her fist into the door jam.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Ryan!” she cursed. “You and your *fucking* strays!” Then, she stormed back into the house, leaving me to stare at the empty street and wonder when that murderous psychopath would be coming back to fuck up my life even more than he already had.

OceanofPDF.com



Cal Walker

Alexa, play: Riot - Hollywood Undead

Buddy clearly knew I was following him. I wasn't exactly being subtle about it, and I didn't really care. It was past nine on a Wednesday morning in a relatively suburban area. Hopefully, most people were working. If worse came to worse, I would just retire the Bentley for a bit after I was done.

My plates were fake anyway.

Driving with my knees, I quickly pulled my skull-face bandana over my nose to hide my shit-eating grin. I needed this. I had a feeling Ryan wasn't going to let me fuck him anytime soon, so I would need a murder moment to hold me off. This fucking asshole was the perfect snack.

His Jaguar fishtailed in front of me as he ran a stop sign. I wondered idly if he was going to be dumb enough to lead me to his house or go straight to the nearest police station. Neither option mattered. If he went to

the police, I just needed to know which precinct he was filing his report with. Then I could hack their records, wipe the report, and get his name and address that way...

Well, when I said *I*, I meant Vox. Don't get me wrong, I could do the basics. Give me enough time, and I could get into most secured networks, but it definitely wasn't my specialty. My buddy, Vox, on the other hand, was a fucking prodigy when it came to black hat hacking.

I was pretty sure Vox wasn't his real name because... that would be fucked, right? Who *literally* names a mute Vox?

For all I know, his shit parents could have had a sick sense of humor. It wasn't clear if Vox *couldn't* speak or just refused to. However, I often suspected he just didn't want to if his one-word text responses and refusal to sign with me were any indication. I usually just yammered his ear off and parroted what I assumed his responses to my antics were back to him based on his facial expressions.

Turning off *Internet Friends* by Knife Party so I could use the text-to-speech function on my phone, I fired off a text to the man in question.

"Yooooooo! Voxy *babyyyy*, I'm shooting you an addy in a sec; you know what to do."

Almost immediately, I received a thumbs-up emoji, and my grin widened beneath my bandana. This was not my first time chasing down some fuckhole for fun, and Vox was usually more than happy to help me out.

To my surprise and absolute delight, my mark turned into a rather large detached home. This was highly unusual. Despite the fact that I was thrilled I wasn't going to have to fish his address out of the system to cash in on a new trophy for my murder shelf, it did make me wary.

If he hadn't gone to the police, it most likely meant he was dirty and wouldn't want the cops involved. It also meant his house was likely armed to the tits with cameras, and he probably had a gun or a bodyguard *with* a gun waiting on the other side of his front door. Or worse, a gun in his car.

The cameras wouldn't be a problem. I dropped a pin to Vox. Once I was inside and had my mark detained, I would send him the make and model of Buddy's modem. Home network devices usually come with default usernames and passwords, which most users don't ever think to change. It would be more than enough to get Vox in to wipe whatever digital evidence of my presence might be caught by any surveillance this guy had installed.

The man in question ripped down his long, winding driveway to the massive house that was set nearly a quarter mile back from the street. His property was enormous and was lined with a barrier of twenty-foot Italian cypress trees, which was excellent.

No witnesses.

But if this guy had a gun and managed to fire a shot at me, there was a risk someone would call 911 if they heard it. I doubted this area of the burbs was accustomed to a casual gunfight on a peaceful Wednesday morning, so I would need to disable my prey as quickly as possible.

Without taking my eyes off the man's tail lights, I reached into the back seat and pulled out my tranquilizer gun. I still had all my murder shit from when I thought I would be killing Ryan. My tranq gun was my favorite way to get my marks under control before the fun began.

It looked like a tiny rifle but was much more lightweight and packed enough punch to knock a hippo out if I needed it to.

Once we made it to the house, Buddy hit the brakes abruptly in front of me. Laughing, I pulled up my parking brake, forcing my Bentley to drift to the left as he dove out of the driver's seat.

Yup, Janie's got a gun. Fuck... now that's gonna be stuck in my head all day. Actually... wouldn't I be Janie in this situation? Nevermind. Maybe 'I shot the sheriff' would be a better reference? Ugh, this is deffo not the time! FOCUS CAL, JESUS!

Giving my head a shake to get back in the game, I caught the matte-black flash of what appeared to be a Beretta clutched in Buddy's right hand as he stumbled out of his vehicle.

However, he had no time to aim. The back end of my car was completing its drift exactly where he had tried to take cover, forcing him to dive once more.

He somersaulted out of the way like some sort of less-cool version of a Cirque du Soleil performer, causing me to laugh again as my car came to a stop seconds before slamming into his.

I sighted backward out of the window with my tranquilizer gun and nailed him directly in the ass just as he was stumbling back to his feet.

"Gotchya!" I grinned as he let out a strangled *argghhhh* and swatted at his ass as he fell to his knees.

I turned off my car and slipped out. It was a little tight getting out because of how close I had come to hitting his Jaguar, but whatever.

Shimmying between our two cars, I strolled over to Mr. *'I'm So Big and Bad I Beat Up Little Boys'* and swiped his gun out of his nearly limp fingers.

"Yerrrr... in soooo, much shit... dooo yewww knooo who yerrr fuckinnn with?"

I chuckled and slipped his gun into the waistband of my jeans—sorry, Damian—and crouched down to meet his gaze. His face was smooshed into his fancy custom driveway, and I thought he looked a little bit like a blobfish.

"Is there anyone in the house I need to be worried about?" I asked.

He tried to spit on me, but it just kind of dribbled out of his mouth due to the fast-working effect of the tranquilizer.

"I'm going to take that as a *'fuck you.'*" I grinned before standing up and approaching the house.

If there was someone inside, they had definitely heard my car squealing out here. If there was a guard detail, they would be out here already, or I would have been shot at.

If there were civilians, then they were probably calling the cops or hiding... or both.

The cops were annoying but normally not a massive problem. Cassandra was my defense attorney (obviously), and she was a fucking bulldog. In the few situations that she couldn't extrapolate me, Damian would usually come to my rescue. *Swoon.*

Damian Ryker had *serious* connections with the legal system, which was a big reason why he had been able to swipe me out of that precinct when I was a child.

Don't get me wrong, I was under no illusions about what kind of a man Damian Ryker was. I knew I had been groomed to be a killer. It wasn't a secret. It just didn't really matter. If I could go back, I would have made the same choice, especially knowing what I know now.

No one would have been able to save me from Ryker. His influence ran too deep. If I had denied him, it would have been Cassandra learning to kill for cash, and honestly, she pulled off a pantsuit better than combat boots.

My sister was way too smart to waste her life doing what I did. Every time I mourned the loss of my childhood, I just cried right into the big ol stack of money Damian paid me for each job.

The money that put a roof over Naomi's head and sent Cass to Harvard.

Boo hoo. Poor Cal. Can do whatever he wants with no consequences and has the money and power to keep his family safe. Tragic.

Anyway, back to how scary Damian is... To give you an idea of how deep his influence runs, the number of dirty cops he has in his pocket would alarm me if it didn't usually work to my advantage.

This is why I got away with being a little bit more, *ahem*, 'cavalier' about my activities than most of my colleagues tended to be. And, though Damian hated bailing me out of trouble when it had something to do with my hobby and not an actual job, he still would.

He had invested too much time and money into me to let me get lost in the system, and despite my reckless nature, you couldn't argue with my success record.

You wanted 'em dead? I would get 'em dead. It just might be a bit messier than it needed to be... but hey. Love what you do, amiright? This wouldn't be half as fun if I didn't get to do fun little car chases like this from time to time, so fuck it.

Keeping close to the house so it would be more difficult to shoot me if there *was* a guard detail inside, I made my way around the perimeter, peeking into windows and checking doorways. Places like this usually had security systems, and most dumbasses put the little sticker advertising what system was guarding their homes.

These could deter a casual B&E from a regular joe shmoe, but when you were fucking with professionals like me, it just made my job easier. Most security systems ran on embedded firmware that could potentially have known vulnerabilities.

If this home's system ran on vulnerable firmware, Vox could exploit those weaknesses to gain control of the system.

Sure enough, in the bottom left-hand corner of this douchebag's fancy French doors was a blue sticker that said: Property monitored by Silver Security Systems.

I snapped a picture and fired it off to Vox on our encrypted chat. He sent me a thumbs up again, and I made my way back to my car to get my wardriving laptop. Firing it up, I gave Vox remote access.

Once my cursor started moving on its own, I left the laptop in the front seat and started gathering all my shit.

I may be a hot mess when the action hits, but when it comes to being prepared for the main event, I'm insanely meticulous. Obviously, I had

gone through my murder kit, like, forty-seven times before leaving the house the night before, but I gave it one more thorough tally before feeling ready to get to business.

I swung the black duffle over my shoulder just as my phone vibrated in my pocket. I slid it out and grinned behind my bandana at Vox's fourth thumbs-up of the day.

I was in.

OceanofPDF.com

16



Cal Walker

Buddy's name was actually Kyle Bradshaw, and he was a fucking judge.

Classy.

Once Vox had breached the alarm system, I searched the home to find that there was no one else in the house, meaning I had free reign to do whatever the fuck I wanted with Judge Bradshaw.

Of course, there was always a risk someone would come home while I was busy with him, but that would honestly just be a bonus. If he had a wife, which seemed to be the case, considering he was wearing a ring, I would need to determine whether or not she needed to die, too. If she had laid one finger on that boy, I was icing her ass as well, so hanging out till she came home just made sense.

If you kill them, they will come.

HA! I was on a roll with the pop culture references today.

Anyway, while waiting for Krusty Kyle to wake up, I hunted down his modem and sent a picture of the make and model to Vox. I got a thumbs

down, which meant Kyle, or someone he had hired, had changed the default username and password.

This shocked me. It was *extremely* rare for people to know how to do this. Like, unless you're in IT or do what I do, you wouldn't know how to change the admin password. The fact that Kyle *had* done that raised serious red flags.

I mean, I guess you could argue that he was a *judge* and would want a super secure network, but you would be surprised.

Since I was literally *in* the house and I had my wardriving laptop with me, it didn't matter. I just connected directly to the network and gave Vox remote access again.

Voila.

All your secrets were mine now, *Dishonourable* Kyle Bradshaw.

Bwahaha!

I had Kyle tied and gagged to one of his kitchen chairs in his swanky modern kitchen. I had made sure to cover the entire place with a shit ton of painter's plastic... you know, for all the blood.

He was going to be out for a while, so I spent the next few hours sifting through the files upon files on documents that Vox was steadily decrypting for me.

Most of it was basic judge stuff, but the deeper I went, the more suspicious I became.

No matter how hard I looked, I couldn't find any evidence that Caleb was this man's biological son. I couldn't find a birth certificate anywhere. There weren't any adoption papers either. During my initial canvas of his house, I found a safe in the master closet. Once I broke into that, I found his marriage certificate there. He was married to a Ms. Amanda Grey... though there were literally no pictures of the happy couple anywhere, not on the walls and not on his computer.

I had begun the tedious process of going through his security footage when I heard the telltale grunt of a tranquilized man waking up.

I fired off a text to Vox, who was watching the footage with me from his remote location at Apex.

CAL:

My new friend is waking up. Ping me if you find anything I can use.

VOX:

Thumbs up emoji

“Morning, Krusty!” I beamed. My bandana was no longer covering my mouth. I wore it around my neck because Kyle, for sure, would not be leaving this house alive. Once I got them in a chair, I usually abandoned all attempts at anonymity.

He was understandably groggy and staring at me with a confused look on his face.

Resting my palms on my knees, I leaned forward, still grinning.

“How’d ya sleep?”

He started screaming into the duct tape I had plastered over his mouth, and I chuckled.

“Oh, Kyle. If I were you, I would save the screaming for later. No one can hear you anyway, and I haven’t even gotten started yet.”

He ignored me and continued to thrash and shout into his gag, which was disappointing.

Sighing, I strolled over to the counter, where I had some of my favorite tools laid out. Picking up a scalpel, I turned to face him, rolling it expertly through my fingers.

“Listen. Shut your ass up, or I’ll be forced to remove your eyelids. I mean... I’m probably going to do that at some point anyway, but wouldn’t you want to put that off as long as possible?”

My threat did not have the desired effect. He just began screaming and thrashing more frantically.

I shrugged. “Alright. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” I straddled his lap and forced his head back with my elbow, pinching one of his eyelids together so I could lift it away from his eye.

Abruptly, he stopped screaming. Instead, I heard what sounded like muffled begging.

I paused, pulling away, giving him a comically ‘stern’ look.

“I can’t understand you. Nod once if you’re going to be good.”

He nodded. I smiled.

“Great!” In one swift movement, I tore the duct tape off his face as I stood up, and he shouted out in pain.

“Jesus fucking *Christ!*” He gasped, his skin now raw and red from where the tape had adhered to his face.

I cackled. “That fucker’s not gonna save you, I can promise you that.”

Kyle glared up at me but said nothing. He knew what this was. Whatever power he was accustomed to wielding in his daily life as a judge was no use here.

Now *I* was the fucking judge. I was also the jury and the mother fucking executioner. And Kyle Bradshaw fucking *knew* it.

“What do you want?” he snapped, and I leaned against the counter, rolling my scalpel between my thumb and index finger as I watched him. “You want money? How much? I’ll give you anything you want!”

I feigned excitement. “Anything I want?” I gasped, and he nodded frantically, either not picking up on the sarcasm or refusing to acknowledge it.

“I want to live in a world where children like Caleb aren’t beaten within an inch of their lives by sick fucks like you.” I smirked, though this time, my smile didn’t reach my eyes. “Can you help me with that?”

He narrowed his eyes on me and snarled. “I did no such thing!”

Rolling my eyes, I pushed up from the counter and made my way over to my laptop, which I had set up on the kitchen table. Vox had already screenshot several still frames from Kyle’s security camera footage that showed him hitting his son.

I turned the laptop around to show him, and his face blanched.

“This is going to be perfect backup footage for the email you’ll be sending later to all your colleagues explaining how you were blackmailed and needed to leave town.” I gave him a dark smile, and his face went from white to green.

He knew what I meant by ‘*leave town.*’

Strolling back up to him, I leaned over again, tracing the tip of my scalpel gently down the side of his face.

“Now, we both know you’re going to die today, Kyle. That’s not up for discussion. However, if you answer my questions quickly and honestly, I might make it quick for you. If you *don’t* cooperate...” I leaned in close to his ear and whispered, “Ever wonder what it would feel like to have an eye cut out of your face while you’re still breathing? I’ve been told that it’s fucking *horrible*. I can’t speak from personal experience, though. You’ll have to let me know.”

He whimpered. The bitch *whimpered*. My nostrils flared, and the scent of urine filled my nose. I pulled away from him, disgusted.

“You can beat a little kid up, but you piss yourself the second someone threatens eyeball removal? Pussy.”

“Please. I’ll tell you anything.” He was literally crying now, and I wiped away one of his tears, mocking him by pouting my bottom lip.

“Aww. Krusty Kyle’s gonna cry. So sad,” I crooned before jamming the scalpel into his thigh, making sure to avoid any major arteries. He screamed bloody murder, and I grinned.

I watched him writhe and scream in satisfaction for a moment when my phone buzzed. I glanced at my conversation with Vox, which now just had several of those big red exclamation point emojis. I frowned and slipped back over to the laptop to see what he had found.

I scrolled through the pop-ups of what looked like... *ownership papers?*
I narrowed my eyes at the screen.

Jesus fucking Christ...

I had seen papers like this before. These were drawn up and usually heavily encrypted in the human trafficking industry. Rich people with more money than morals exchanged these slips to solidify the sale of literal human beings on the dark web.

What was the Honourable Kyle Bradshaw doing with these on his fucking computer?

Choosing one of the slips, I ran a search for the name listed under the field labeled ‘product.’ My stomach bottomed out when a missing person ad immediately popped up for a little girl named Cherry Dawson.

I flipped through several more slips before coming across one for... *Amanda Grey*. My blood went cold. Amanda Grey? As in his...*wife?*

He owned his wife?

I glanced up from the screen to look at Kyle, who was slumped over in a kitchen chair that probably cost more than most people’s cars.

Had I just stumbled on someone involved in a human trafficking ring?

Was Caleb a child born from this man raping his ‘wife’? Or had he purchased him, too?

Judges were elected officials. I knew enough about the process from what Cassandra had told me to understand that you didn’t necessarily need to be a good person to be elected. You just needed to be popular.

It was common for judges to marry to assume the image of a ‘*family man*.’ People trusted a man more if he had a family. Don’t ask me why, but it’s true.

Why not just marry any gold digger off the street? Well, I would assume it would be a pain in the ass to hide the fact that you're helping some underground crime ring literally *sell fucking people* from someone who lived in your house.

Why not just buy a wife from the ring you're running and call it a day? He probably knocked her up with Caleb and paid someone to deliver him privately to keep her out of the hospital. Hospitals typically needed identification and health records... That would explain the lack of a birth certificate.

My mind was running a mile a minute. Of course, this was all speculation, but it was all *very fucking plausible*.

When you run in the circles I do for as long as I have, you start to assume the absolute worst of people.

You know the term *innocent until proven guilty*?

Yeah, well... as far as I was concerned, it's guilty until proven innocent. The world is a vile place filled with people like Kyle fucking Bradshaw operating in plain sight... I would even consider myself one of the vile people that plagued this planet.

Not everyone I killed deserved to die. Many of them were just targets on a list, and I told myself that whatever they had done to get their asses put on said list was none of my business.

But... sometimes... sometimes I wished things were different.

Maybe that was why I had this hobby. It was my way of trying to balance out my karmic debt, considering the amount of innocent blood I probably had on my hands.

Or maybe it was just fucking revenge against the mother that I never got the chance to kill myself.

Either way, Kyle would be answering for more than just his own sins today... As soon as he answered my questions... and I suddenly had a lot of them.

"Hey, Kyle?" I asked, keeping my voice deceptively light. "Where's Amanda?"



Cal Walker

You know how in TV shows, the serial killer always has the same persona they show the world, then the persona they have while they're killing? I don't really have that. I'm pretty much just Cal one hundred percent of the time unless you're *extra* special and are somehow able to *actually* piss me off.

When I'm killing someone for Damian, it's all business. It's almost impossible for a mark to piss me off in those instances. They can say or do whatever they want, and it just rolls off my back because, honestly, I get it. I wouldn't take my impending death lying down, either. So, if some nameless John Doe wants to call me a faggot, I let it slide. If you want your last words to be homophobic slurs, who am I to take that away from you?

When I'm killing someone like Kyle, I'm even more myself. Murdering scum like Kyle doesn't make me angry. It brings me *so much fucking joy*.

So much so that I typically draw these kills out. I make them last. I think the longest I've ever taken to kill a child abuser was three days, and that was because I had literally caught the woman in the act.

That bitch lit up my dopamine centers like a fucking Christmas tree, and she had paid for it.

The only time I *really* got mad was if someone stumbled across one of my triggers. For example, a big trigger of mine is Cass and Naomi's safety (for obvious reasons.) I went full blackout on some dude from Apex once when he implied he was going to fuck Cass against her will.

I'm sure you can guess where that fucking guy is right now.

If you guessed six feet under, then congrats. Big fat, shiny gold star for you. No one has said a word about my sisters since.

Another big one for me is being called the devil. Anything biblical that's meant to paint me as evil tends to make my brain go kaboom. My therapist says it's because my mother was screaming those words at me when she died, but what the fuck do I know. I just know I don't like it.

I also tend to get a little pissed off if someone puts me in a position where I might hurt a child.

Remember, I told you Damian had once tried to put me on a job where the child was a mark, and I had lost my shit?

Yeah. That was angry Cal.

You don't want to meet angry Cal.

And right now, sitting at Kyle's plastic-wrapped kitchen table, staring at the scans of ownership papers Vox had pulled up, I was doing my best to keep angry Cal in his fucking cage.

The trading number on almost all of these slips was 2739.

I wouldn't have noticed it, but it had just occurred to me that if I wanted to find my next target, it would be a lot easier to hunt down the scum that ran this ring than camp out in parks using Naomi as a scout.

What is the significance of 2739, you ask? Well, it's the same code that I use to confirm the completion of my jobs for Damian.

It could be a coincidence that my code was written on these slips... However, I didn't believe in fucking coincidence. Not in my line of work.

Kyle groaned, snapping me out of the dark turn my thoughts had taken me, and I glanced up at him.

I had made good on my promise and cut out his right eye. He was also missing all his fingers on his left hand.

He was left-handed, so it was the hand I had seen him hit Caleb with the most in the security footage. I started with his ring finger. Bye-bye wedding ring.

“You ready to tell me where Amanda is, big guy?” I asked, shoving down the boiling pot of rage that was brewing in my chest.

2739, 2739, 2739...

I was going to have to talk to Damian to get this cleared up. If this had anything to do with Apex, I would lose it.

Kyle whimpered and rolled his head back; his mouth fell open as he moaned, and I rolled my eyes, getting up from the table and grabbing a pair of pliers from my row of tools on his counter.

“Alright. Don’t tell me.”

I straddled his lap and squeezed his jaw farther open, exposing his teeth to me. His right eye tooth was pearly white and just begging to be soaked in blood.

He seized beneath me and tried to turn his head away, but I held him still and pinched his tooth between the pliers before ripping it clean out of his gums.

He screamed, and blood spurted out of his mouth, but I paid it no mind as I held my prize up before me, grinning like some sort of deranged tooth fairy.

“Can’t wait to add this one to my collection.” I smirked, getting off of him and making my way to the sink to rinse off my new trophy.

“You’re a lunatic!” he roared, spitting blood all over himself.

I shrugged. “And you’re a rapist.”

“Fuck you!”

“What? I thought we were just swapping facts?”

Kyle’s one remaining eye was swimming with tears. His hand was dripping blood in a steady pattern on the thick plastic under his chair, and his entire chin was crimson from his bleeding gums.

“You don’t look so good, Kyle. Shall we continue? Or have you had enough?”

His lip trembled, and I smiled. I was so close to breaking him. He didn’t have much fight left in him, and I was honestly surprised he had lasted this long.

I stuffed his clean tooth into my pocket next to the weird little pouch Iris had given me and leaned forward, meeting Kyle’s eye.

“Please... stop,” he whimpered.

“You know how to make it stop, Kyle. Tell me where Amanda is, and this all ends. I’ll let you rest.”

He looked at me with so much desperate hope that I would have felt bad for him if he wasn't a child-beating rapist.

But alas, I felt nothing but happiness that he was suffering so much.

"In the basement. There's a hidden panel behind the bar. You need my fingerprint to open the door."

My eye twitched.

The basement.

"You're all the fucking same, aren't you?" I growled, the smile slipping off my face.

I had checked the basement thoroughly. But not '*I'm looking for a secret underground sex trafficking room*' thoroughly.

"You're fucking disgusting," I told him as I circled behind him. I positioned one hand on his forehead and the other on his jaw.

"I thought you said you were going to stop! You said you would let me go!" he cried, and I shook my head even though he couldn't see me.

"*Shh. Shh.* No Kyle. I said I would let you *rest*. And rest you shall. Night night." Then I twisted his neck until it snapped.

The life seeped out of him. He slumped in his chair immediately, and I found that I was smiling again.

I loved a good neck snap. So much less cleanup than an arterial bleed. I already had my hands full with the amount of blood that had spilled from his left hand, but serendipitously, I had already cut off a bunch of fingers to try out on the control panel for the secret door.

Dope.

Being careful to wipe the fingers off so they wouldn't dribble blood all over the floor, I collected them and headed downstairs.

Kyle's basement was enormous and just as bougie as the rest of his house. There was a full home theatre and a massive bar crafted from white marble. Slipping behind the bar, I examined the wall until I found a small, unassuming black scanner. I guessed right the first time when I pressed his thumb against it, and I heard a series of clicks as the locking mechanism sprang to life. The door, which happened to be the entire liquor display of the bar, began to slowly open inward, revealing one of the most sickening sights I had seen since I escaped my own basement prison.

A strange, cold feeling rushed through me as I took in the various cages in this dark, secret room. There were also tripods and staged areas that I didn't even want to fucking look at.

I walked right by them as I made my way deeper into the room and found Amanda blindfolded and chained to a tiny, single bed in the back. She was frail, blond, and wearing a long white nightgown that had seen better days.

“Mr. Bradshaw. *Please*. Let me see him. I’m so sorry. It’s my fault he got out. I wasn’t watching him. Please don’t hurt him.” She was begging, and relief flooded through me as I realized I had been right. This woman was Caleb’s mother, and she was clearly just as much of a victim as he was.

“Hey,” I said softly, and she stiffened. Though she couldn’t see me, she could tell by my voice that I wasn’t her captor. She began to cower and pull away from me. I noticed how she clenched her legs together tightly, and I gritted my teeth together at the sight.

She thought I was here to rape her.

“Amanda... I’m not here to hurt you. I’m here to set you free,” I told her softly, and her lip trembled slightly. She shook her head and shrunk farther into the wall by her bed.

“No... no. I don’t believe you. It’s a trick,” she whimpered. “Kyle!” I winced as she started screaming for her captor. Did she think he had sent me down as some sort of twisted test?

“Kyle is dead, sweetie,” I murmured, crouching down and tugging down her blindfold so she could see my face. I held out my hand, showing her his dismembered fingers. His wedding ring was still on the ring finger, and her eyes widened in shock.

She swallowed so hard I could hear it before turning those big blue eyes back up to me.

“H-he’s dead?” she whispered, and I nodded.

“Yeah. He’s dead. And your son is safe. I’m going to get you out of here, okay? I will have to touch you, but just so I can unchain you. I won’t touch you anywhere else. Do you know where he keeps the keys?” I asked, gesturing toward her manacles.

“With his car keys.”

My eye twitched again. Of course he kept the keys to his belongings together. Fuck. I was glad I killed him. Even more glad I made him cry like a bitch the whole time.

“Alright. I’m going to go find the keys. Once I untie you, you can come upstairs if you want, but I’ll warn you it’s a bit of a mess. I haven’t cleaned up Kyle yet, and things got a little messy,” I said, standing up, and she met

my gaze head-on, her eyes burning with the type of fire only survivors seemed to possess.

“Good,” was all she said, and I smirked before turning away.

OceanofPDF.com

18



Cal Walker

“Jesus fuck, Cal. You have to stop doing this!” I held my phone away from my ear to protect my eardrums from Cassandra’s shrill tone.

“What was I supposed to do, Cass? Just leave her down there?”

“Why were you there in the first place?”

“Just working, you know how it is.”

“Don’t pull that shit with me; you wouldn’t be calling me if this was one of those fucked up jobs you do for that twat waffle. You were hunting. Did you drag Naomi into this? I fucking told you if you used her as bait again, I was going to saw your balls off!”

Jesus... *saw*? She couldn’t just *cut* them off like a normal sociopath? I cupped my dick over my jeans, soothing it gently as my balls tried to crawl up into my body and away from my scary sister’s voice.

“She’s not *bait*. She’s a *scout*. Anyway, it doesn’t matter. What’s done is done. I have to take out the trash, and my car needs a detail.” My not-so-subtle code for ‘*I need to dispose of a body and swap out cars.*’ The Bentley

was hot now. I hadn't been the most careful with this one, and I needed to cover my tracks.

"Can you *please* dig deep to find that dead, shriveled thing you call a heart and squeeze one tiny drop of empathy out of it? She's a fucking sex slave, and he's just a little kid, Cassandra. This asshole had her locked in the fucking basement. There were *cages*."

The line went quiet, and I knew I had her.

I wasn't the only one with triggers.

"Fine. Bring her to my place, and I'll get her cleaned up. Don't you bring this shit anywhere near Naomi, Cal. I'm fucking serious."

"Okay, okay. Fine. I'll send her to you with Vox. I need to take the trash out so I can't come with him. Can she stay the night? We can reunite her with the kid in the morning."

"Why can't you bring the kid here now? She's going to want to be with him. Besides, the faster I can get these two into a shelter and out of my hair, the fucking better."

I tongued my lip ring anxiously, thinking about how unlikely it was Ryan was going to let me take the kid anywhere without kicking up a fuss.

"It's complicated; you just have to trust me," I said, wondering how I could convince Ryan that the kid was safe now. Suddenly, I had an idea. Ryan didn't trust me at all, but that was because I was a 6'4" mercenary who looked like he belonged in a 90s punk band.

He would likely trust an Ivy League lawyer in a pencil skirt with a no-nonsense attitude.

"Let her stay the night. I'm going to text you an address... Can you bring her to this spot tomorrow morning?"

"What time? I have court at two."

"I don't know. Early. Whenever is good for you."

"Fine."

"Loveee youuuuu!" I chirped, but I was already speaking to a dead line. She had hung up on me, which was typical. No one ever said it back.

Amanda was watching me from where she was perched on the dead bastard's couch. She had changed into a pair of sweats and a hoodie while I cleaned up the mess that was Kyle. I had him neatly rolled in the thick painter's plastic and duct taped up.

Amanda explained that she and Caleb had been more or less allowed free range of the house as long as they obeyed the rules. She had belonged

to Kyle for ten fucking years. At first, she lived in the room I had saved her from, but as time went on, he had given her more and more freedom.

After she had Caleb, Kyle had even begun to take her to work events and press conferences, dressing her up and keeping her on his arm. It was easier to control her with the threat of her son's safety on the line.

Apparently, Caleb had been sneaking out of the house to play at the park for a while now. He was too young to understand that his situation wasn't normal, which is why he hadn't raised any sort of alarm. Amanda said she had been trying to stop Caleb from sneaking out for months, but he always seemed to slip away. When she couldn't find him the night before, Kyle finally found out, and he had been furious. He locked her back up in the room and went on a rampage trying to hunt the kid down.

"I'm sorry if I'm causing you trouble," she whispered, and I gave her one of my most charming smiles.

"Not at all. My sister's just grumpy. She needs to get laid," I muttered, glancing down at my phone to find a text from Vox.

VOX:

waving emoji.

CAL:

Cool. You good to take the vic to Cassandra's?

VOX:

Thumbs up emoji

I turned to Amanda. "My friend is going to drive you to my sisters. I need to get rid of Kyle."

Amanda looked nervous. "Your friend?"

I could see the apprehension in her eyes. She didn't trust men, and I didn't blame her.

"He's cool, I promise. No one is going to hurt you, Amanda. I'm not going to make you do anything you don't want to do. If you wanted to leave right now and never see me again, I would say see you later and wish you luck. It's just complicated because Caleb is at a safe house of sorts, and it's going to take me some time to get him back to you."

"When can I see him?" she asked, her blue eyes swimming with apprehension.

"First thing in the morning. I promise," I assured her. She didn't look convinced, but she pursed her lips and nodded.

I gestured to the front door. "After you."

Bending down, I scooped up the plastic-wrapped asshole and followed Amanda out of the house.

Kyle was heavy, but it was nothing I couldn't manage. Cleaning up was my least favorite part of the gig, but it was hella necessary to make sure your ass stayed out of jail.

At least I wasn't going to have to chop this guy up or dig a grave.

My new best friend Ryan would be helping me with this one. I grinned to myself at the thought.

He was gonna be so mad. I snickered at the thought.

Vox was already kneeling in front of my Bentley with a lit cigarette hanging from his lips and a screwdriver in his hands, working on swapping out my plates.

I dropped Kyle's corpse unceremoniously down in front of the Mercedes Brabus G Wagon that Vox had brought over for me. It was one of several cars I had in my collection at Apex, and since I was going to need to retire the Bentley, I figured I would opt for something roomier for my main ride. It didn't have *anything* to do with the tall, cranky, and broad-shouldered ginger man that I couldn't stop thinking about. Nope. Had nothing to do with him at all.

Okay. Maybe it had a *little* bit to do with making sure he was comfy when I inevitably convinced him to give me road-head. But it also had tons of room to cart around dead bodies, so it was a win-win all around.

"Keys?" I said, turning to face Vox and holding out my hands to catch. Vox stopped what he was doing and took a deep haul on his dart before reaching into his back pocket to grab the keys. He tossed them to me, and I sent him the Bentley set.

Vox was leaner than me, with deep olive skin and dark brown hair that he often bleached unicorn white.

He looked like a young Billy Idol on a good day and a sun-bronzed Spike from Buffy the Vampire Slayer on a bad day.

Where I was always in some kind of band T-shirt, Vox was usually in plain black. Black cotton T-shirts and close-fit leather pants tucked into combat boots were his uniform. Today, he had on a studded leather jacket, which hid the two full sleeves of tattoos I knew he had on his arms.

Without looking at Amanda, he clicked the unlock button for the doors to the Bentley and got back to work on the plates.

“Um...” Amanda hovered, clearly not knowing what to do, and I gave her what I hoped was a kind, reassuring smile.

“He doesn’t speak. Don’t take it personally. Hop in the back seat. He’s going to drop you off at my sister’s; she doesn’t live far from here.” Amanda nodded, wringing her hands together nervously. Then, without warning, she threw her arms around my waist and hugged me. She shook slightly and buried her face in my chest, and I stood frozen, unsure what I was supposed to do. After a long, tense moment, she whispered a gentle ‘*thank you*’ before tearing away and scurrying into the back seat of the Bentley.

“Anytime... I guess,” I said, scratching the back of my neck awkwardly. That was the first time a vic had hugged me. Sometimes it was easy to forget that I was actually making a difference with my deranged little hobby. It felt strange accepting her thanks. I wasn’t doing it for her. I was doing it for the tiny version of myself who had spent the first ten years of his life locked in a cage. Helping people like Amanda and Caleb was just a nice bonus.

Vox smirked at my dumbfounded expression as he finished up with my front plate. He moved to get in the driver’s seat, but I stopped him.

“Hey, after you drop off the car, can you swing by my place and check on Naomi?”

He scowled at me, flipping me the bird.

“What! Come on, man, please? I’m not gonna be home for ages, and Cass said she was going to murder me if I brought my bullshit anywhere near her.”

Vox’s liquid grey eyes simmered with annoyance, and he shook his head.

“Dude, what’s the big deal? We both know you don’t have any plans. I’m like... your *only* friend.”

He rolled his eyes and flipped me off again before climbing into the driver’s seat.

Leaning my hands on the door, I forced my head in through the open window as he punched the ignition.

“Just chill in the house until I get home. You can work from the kitchen, no? I’ll owe you.” This made him pause. He raised those silver eyes up at me, and a dangerous smile cocked on his perfect lips.

Vox was hot as *fuck*. It was a literal crime that he was straight. And I don't mean like, *'I'm straight, but I still get a boner while wrestling with my sexy home invader'* straight. He was *straight, straight*. Like, dude didn't even like seeing *my* weiner, and my dick was a thing of fucking beauty if I did say so myself.

He raised an eyebrow at me and waited for me to read his mind, as usual.

"*What are you going to give me if I watch over your little sister for you, Cal?*" I quipped out loud in the voice I used whenever I was pretending to be him. His grin spread wider, and his eyes sparkled.

Little fucker.

"Hmm. I'll make you dinner for a week."

He wrinkled his nose and released the brake, allowing the car to roll back.

"Ok, ok, ok, bigger than that... ummmmm. I'll give you one of my cars? The Aston Martin. I see you checking that one out all the time."

An Aston Martin felt a little steep for spending a few hours with my insanely charming younger sister, but I didn't say that out loud. I was pretty desperate for him to check on her. I hadn't been home in over 24 hours, and I had no idea how long I would be dealing with this body. Outside of Cass, Vox was the only other person I would trust with Naomi's safety. I needed this favor.

He rocked his head back and forth as if he wasn't sure.

I sighed. "Fine. The Aston Martin *and* one no-strings-attached I.O.U."

That won him over. He shot me a devilish smirk and ran a hand through his bleached hair before nodding.

"You're a bastard, you know that? You couldn't just help me out of the goodness of your heart?"

He rolled his eyes again and gestured to his general surroundings, clearly pointing out that he had already derailed his entire day to help clean up my mess. Without waiting for me to respond, he hit the button to roll up the window, forcing me away from the car.

"You win this round, Voxy!" I called after him as he reversed expertly down the long, winding driveway.

I turned around to eye up my plastic-wrapped corpse with a sigh.

"Alright, Kyle. Let's go," I said to the corpse, popping open the trunk of the all-black G-Wagon. "Killing you was fun and all, but honestly, I'm

more looking forward to getting rid of you.” I grinned to myself as I hauled him into the trunk.

I couldn’t wait to see the look on Ryan’s face when I showed back up at his house with his first delivery.

I could see him now, with his sexy scowl and his hot red cheeks. My dick twitched in my pants as I jumped up into the driver’s seat of the G-Wagon. He was going to be just as annoyed with me as Vox was... The only difference was that I would be more than happy to trade favors with Ryan Fairview.

OceanofPDF.com

19



Ryan Fairview

Alexa, Play: Ain't No Rest For The Wicked - Original Version - Cage
The Elephant

My mother took Caleb out with her shortly after Cal left. Iris spent a great deal of her time with a local group of women who were into all the same witchy things she was. They met weekly and often had what they called 'circle' on significant nights during the lunar cycle.

I had resented this as a child. The bullying I had endured from children who were convinced my mother was part of some sort of satanic church was pretty ruthless. However, now, as an adult, I was really just happy she had such a strong support system, especially after the death of my father.

Theo left the house as well. She was still clearly furious with me for dragging our family into whatever mess this was. I knew she was going to sign up for a fight, but as much as I hated it, there was no point trying to convince her to stay. Despite the fact that I could have used the help

preparing for Ms. Thompson's funeral the following day. Especially not when I was the reason she needed to blow off some steam.

Running an entire funeral home solo was not an easy task. Iris often helped with the paperwork (and there is *a lot* of paperwork), but as my sister tells me, I'm a bit of a control freak, so I tend to review everything she does anyway.

It was so much easier with my dad here. He would usually prepare the bodies and coordinate with the cemetery staff. He also acted as our unofficial grief counselor, something that I just was not nearly as good at.

Like I said, I'm an introvert, and it's not that I don't sympathize or feel for the family members of the deceased while they're grieving. I just always feel like my platitudes come off as insincere and flat. This, coupled with the fact that their dead loved ones are usually sitting next to me, begging me to share their last words with grieving family members, makes the entire process unbearable for me.

My favorite part of the job is arranging the florals. I *love it* when families have the budget to send massive orders of bouquets to the house, and when they don't, I quietly offer it as a complimentary service.

Iris has quite the green thumb, and she has an impressive garden out back filled with herbs and flowers that she allows me to take from in these instances.

Ms. Thompson's family had a moderate budget for flowers, but after the insane chain of events I had just lived through, I found myself in my mother's garden snipping up some lilies to make a bouquet. Floral arrangements just... soothed me.

The hot mid-afternoon sun was scorching the back of my neck as I bent over Iris's plot, and I lost myself to the methodical *snip, snip, snip* of my sheers. Doing my best not to let my anxiety get the best of me, I avoided falling down the rabbit hole of overthinking what Cal had said earlier about me *working* for him.

I had already over-thought this too much as it was. Every time I spiraled, I ended up nearly calling the police. However, I had yet to follow through. I told myself it was because I was worried about what would happen to Caleb if I got the police involved, but for some reason, that felt like a lie.

Instead of focusing on the fact that I had been held at fucking *gunpoint* in my own home, I kept thinking about how that dangerous, smiling, black-

haired man had been so kind to my mother.

What was with that?

I had grown up constantly needing to defend my mother and then consequently getting my ass beat for standing up for her. It got a little better after Theo made me take up boxing, but the lessons in self-defense didn't do anything to protect me from the harsh sting of cruel words.

She had passed Cal a homemade talisman that I knew she had crafted to keep his harem of ghouls away from me, and he hadn't ridiculed her or rolled his eyes. He had just agreed to keep it on his person and tucked it into his pocket.

Then, the next second, he had me slammed against the wall and was threatening my life...

I couldn't figure that guy out. He was a walking dichotomy.

Abruptly, the peace of my afternoon was interrupted by the steady approach of deep bass and that strange robotic squeal that Cal had been blasting when he left that morning.

Despite the heat of the sun, my body went cold, and all the hair on my arms stood on end.

He was back.

I turned slowly to see a very large, expensive black SUV pull up. It looked like a mini tank and was clearly meant for offroading. It probably cost more than most people's homes from the look of it, and my jaw dropped as my new stalker hopped out of the driver's seat with that infuriating grin on his face.

He had his skull bandana tied around his neck, and he slid his black Ray-Bans down his nose to give me that look that made me feel like he could see right through my clothes.

"You look good on your knees, ginger snap," he said, sucking in his lip ring suggestively.

My cheeks burned, and I leapt to my feet, brandishing my sheers at him. He glanced at the sharp object with an amused cock of his head.

"If you have a blood kink, just say so. I have more sanitary options in the wagon." He winked at me. "Wouldn't want you getting an infection. Nothing hot about intravenous antibiotics. I can tell you that for free."

"What!? I don't have a *blood kink*!" I exclaimed, tossing the sheers away from me as if they had burned me. How did he make literally *everything* sexual?

He just smirked and made his way to the back of his crazy murder mobile, popping the back open and gesturing for me to come closer.

“How do you know? You ever bleed someone during sex?”

“Of course not!”

“Ever let anyone bleed you?”

“No!”

“Then how do you know you don’t have a blood kink?”

My mouth opened and closed several times as I struggled to find the words to respond.

“While you figure it out, want to come give me a hand?” he asked, and before I knew what I was doing, I found myself coming around the SUV to peer inside.

If I had no words before, I certainly didn’t have any now.

This fucking psychopath had a *body* in the back of his car!

It was expertly wrapped in thick, opaque plastic, but even if I wasn’t a mortician, I wouldn’t have any trouble identifying the large morbid package for what it was.

I gaped at Cal, and my hands suddenly began to quiver.

“You... you really did it. You killed him!”

“Duh,” Cal said noncommittally before reaching forward and dragging the corpse closer to him. He moved the body so easily as if this grown-ass dead man weighed nothing. I stepped away reflexively as he hiked the corpse over his shoulder, the plastic crinkling as it moved.

“This is insane. *You’re* insane!” I rambled, and he shot me another easy grin over his shades.

“Again, I say, Duh.” He smirked before heading toward the back door of my house. I scrambled after him, feeling panicked.

Where was he taking that body!? Not into my fucking house!

But I couldn’t speak. I was pretty sure I was going into shock.

“Can you get the door, please?” he asked politely, and I considered refusing for a moment before I realized that the longer this man had this corpse slung over his shoulder in my fucking backyard, the more likely it was someone would see me with him and potentially call the cops.

I opened the door, and he strode into my kitchen, glancing back at me quizzically.

“Where do you want him?” he asked, and I sputtered.

Where did I want him? Literally anywhere but inside my damn house!

“Do you have one of those human toasters? I don’t know much about funeral homes. Do you just do the embalming, or do you handle the urn shit too?”

“You mean cremation?” I asked, feeling like I was fucking underwater.

His entire face lit up, and he snapped his fingers with the hand that wasn’t balancing a corpse over his shoulder.

“*That’s* the word. *Cremation*. Thanks. That was going to bug the shit out of me.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose and did everything I could to focus on my breathing. Now was not the time to have a panic attack. This was madness, but... I didn’t know what I could do.

If I tried to call the police, I was sure he would fucking kill me. I should have called them before. Not calling them made me a fucking idiot; I knew that, but I couldn’t go back now.

He had already told me he would kill me if I didn’t help him with this. He clearly worked for a larger group of people that would put my family in danger, even if I managed to get him arrested.

I was royally *screwed*.

Beating back the panic, which was already triggering another boner, I resolved to focus on his question instead of worrying about how all of this was going to pan out. Staying in the present and focusing on what was happening right now was the only way I could make it through this without succumbing to a full-blown panic attack.

“We have a crematorium, yes,” I replied. “My dad had one installed a few years after I was born.” I remember him telling me how much of a pain in the ass it had been too. Crematoriums needed all kinds of permits, and the entire house needed to have proper ventilation added to it, but it had been worth it. Cremation was one of our most popular services, and the addition had more or less paid for itself.

“Great! In the basement, I’m assuming? What do I do... just toss him in and light a match? What’s the procedure?”

“No! Of course not. First, we need to make sure he doesn’t have any medical devices on him. The last thing you want to do is expose a battery to high temperatures like that. It could literally explode.”

Cal looked... fascinated, which isn’t a reaction I was used to when talking about my line of work. A strange, warm feeling stirred in my gut at

the way his brown eyes were locked on mine. He ran his tongue over his lip and nodded in understanding.

“Cool. So, what, you want him on a table somewhere?”

“Ugh. Just... follow me,” I grumbled, finally giving in to whatever nightmare Cal had forcibly dragged me into.

OceanofPDF.com

20



Ryan Fairview

Alexa, play: DArkSide - Bring Me The Horizon

I led Cal out of the private part of my home and into the parlor. Jogging down the stairs to the basement, I flicked on the light, instinctively glancing back to make sure Cal was managing the stairs alright with his...*parcel*.

We passed Theo's tiny home gym, and I unlocked the heavy steel door that led to the preparation room. I gestured to the stainless steel table in the center of the space, and Cal dumped the corpse on it unceremoniously.

On reflex, I nearly snapped at him to have some respect for the dead. I would *never* handle a body that way. However, the darkness I had seen in Cal's eyes when he confronted the man in our foyer was back. I remembered exactly *who* it was that was on my table and sobered.

Slipping on my lab coat. I offered Cal an apron. He took it from me without comment and slipped it over his head, tying the waist straps around

his hips.

He watched me slip on a pair of safety glasses, and I handed him a box of latex gloves. He looked amused but snapped on a pair and pushed his Ray-Bans back on, I assumed in place of eye gear.

I handed him a mask, but he shook his head and pulled up his skull bandana instead.

“What’s all this for? Dude’s dead.” He chuckled.

I sighed. “It’s to protect *us*. You don’t want someone else’s bodily fluids all over you; you can get sick. Also, I usually work with several chemicals that are harmful to the living, so personal protective equipment and proper hygiene are very important.”

Cal chuckled at the mention of *bodily fluids*, but he nodded along. I couldn’t tell if he was genuinely listening or just humoring me. It didn’t matter.

I grabbed a pair of straight scissors and got to work unwrapping the body. It was clear that this was not Cal’s first time packaging up a body in this manner. The plastic was folded and taped neatly. The creases were arranged in such a way that any blood or leakage was expertly contained. Not one drop of blood had leaked out, and... there was *quite* a bit of blood. Once I had the plastic open, I raised a quizzical eyebrow at Cal.

He had done some *damage* to this man. Honestly, I had seen worse. You process enough car accident victims, and you quickly learn just how delicate the human body is.

However, this was somehow different.

This man wasn’t missing the fingers on his left hand because he had been involved in a workplace accident... It was because the man standing across from me had *cut them off while he was still alive*.

My own hands began to quiver, and I swallowed, staring across the table at the devastatingly attractive but horrifyingly *dangerous* man standing across from me.

He flipped up his Ray-Bans so I could see his eyes, and he frowned.

“Hey,” he said softly, his tone full of something that sounded a lot like concern. “What’s wrong, ginger snap?”

He reached across the table and gently took my trembling hand. He rubbed his gloved finger over my knuckles, and I couldn’t tell if it was soothing or disturbing.

“You were going to do this to me,” I breathed, and the uncontrollable quivering intensified.

His brown eyes flooded with remorse, and he slipped around the table to my side. I jerked away from him, but he snatched up my wrists and spun me around to face him.

“Listen to me. I am not going to kill you. I only kill assholes who hurt kids... and whoever my boss puts on his list, but even if he told me to kill you, I wouldn’t, Ryan.”

I tried to pull away again, not liking the way my body was reacting to his proximity.

“I don’t know that!” I exclaimed. “I can’t trust that you’re not going to turn around and murder me one day. I don’t know you at all, and what I do know about you is fucking terrifying.”

He pinched my chin between his gloved fingers and jerked my head back to face him. I found myself suddenly wishing we weren’t wearing masks. I wanted to feel his breath on my lips again like I had earlier in the hallway.

As soon as the thought crossed my mind, my stomach roiled with guilt.

I couldn’t be thinking like this... I wasn’t *gay*. I had a *girlfriend*. My body was just reacting inappropriately to how afraid I was like it always did.

“You’re right, Ryan. You don’t know anything about me. There’s a lot more to me than what I’ve shown you. Give me a chance. You might like my other parts.” He said the words like he was teasing, but the burn in his gaze told me he was being serious. He legitimately wanted me to give him a chance... A chance for *what* exactly, I wasn’t sure.

A friendship?

An illegal business arrangement where I disposed of his bodies for him?

What did this guy fucking *want*?

“Not sure how I’m supposed to trust the literal *devil*,” I snapped.

Suddenly, all the warmth and playfulness disappeared from Cal’s eyes. It was almost like he wasn’t human anymore. Even with his bandana covering his face, I knew I had seriously fucked up.

Abruptly, his fingers were no longer caressing my chin but wrapped around my throat.

“The *fuck* did you just call me?” he snarled, cocking a fist back. I brought up an arm to block his punch just in time to catch it with my

forearm. Pain exploded all the way to my elbow, and I tried to jerk away from him, but he still had me by the throat.

Almost effortlessly, he tossed me against the preparation table. I slammed into it so hard that the corpse of Caleb's father slid off and tumbled to the floor with a sickening *thud*.

"Cal, stop!" I growled, pushing up from the table and balancing on the balls of my feet. He was coming at me full tilt, and I ducked to avoid another punch. On my way up, I cut a jab directly to his ribs, and he grunted but didn't stop coming for me.

"You think I'm the devil, mortuary boy?" he snarled, and a chill crept down my spine. I almost sobbed in frustration as my dick immediately hardened at the terrifying look in his eyes.

He swung at me again, and this time, I wasn't fast enough; he connected with my cheek so hard it sent me spinning into the table. I braced my palms on the cold stainless steel top and prepared to push myself back up, only to find he had plastered himself to my back.

Cal laced his fingers through my hair and slammed my face down into the surface so hard I shouted in surprise.

He had me bent over and at his mercy. Pressing his mouth against my hair, he allowed his soft lips to tickle the sensitive skin on my ear. His bandana had slipped down, and I shivered as his hot breath caressed the side of my neck.

"I'm not the devil, Ryan Fairview. I'm your fucking *god*, and you will *beg* me for forgiveness," he hissed. Then he bit the wrist of his latex glove on his free hand and ripped it off with a *snap*.

My head was spinning from being hit in the face so hard. I barely registered it as he snaked his now bare hand around my hips and deftly undid the button to my jeans.

"What the fuck!" I thrashed beneath him, but he pressed his body into me harder, ramming my hip bones into the sharp edge of the table. The blood drained from my face as the sound of my zipper pulling open filled the room.

"Get the fuck off me, what are you doing!?" I snarled, but my protests died in my surgical mask as his massive, rough hand slid down the front of my boxers. I let out a strangled whine as he pulled my stiff cock out under the table.

“Fuck.” He hissed into my ear. Cal wrapped his fingers around me, causing my hips to jerk at the contact. “So hard for me, ginger snap.” He growled as he ran his thumb over my crown. To my horror and humiliation, a bead of pre-cum smeared beneath his touch, and I thrashed again, feeling my hair tear slightly at the follicles beneath his punishing grip.

“Stop,” I groaned as he leisurely pumped his hand up and down my throbbing erection. He didn’t listen. Instead, he ground his hips into my ass and continued to stroke me beneath the table.

“All you’re doing is proving me right! I can’t trust you not to turn on me!” I snapped, though my hips were suddenly rocking of their own accord, and I was panting.

His hand felt so *fucking* good, and a deep, burning need began to tingle at the base of my spine.

I yelped as he closed his hot mouth around my earlobe. He sucked while simultaneously squeezing and twisting my dick in his hand.

His breath sent a shiver of gooseflesh through my entire body as he exhaled against my ear.

“Just because I won’t kill you doesn’t mean I won’t punish you, Ryan,” he rumbled, and I could only whimper in response. I had lost all sense and was now shamelessly thrusting into his hand.

“Please,” I begged, and he nipped my lobe again, causing me to let out an embarrassingly desperate moan. When was the last time I had come? I couldn’t even fucking remember. Was it supposed to feel this good? It didn’t feel this good when it was my own hand... The few times I had stuffed my dick in some girl, it hadn’t even felt this good...

What was wrong with me?

“Please, what? Let you go? Let you come? Use your words, baby. Tell me what you want.”

“I’m not your baby!” I snarled. “I’m fucking straight, get the fuck off of me!” The unexpected pet name snapped me out of my temporary lapse of insanity, and I struggled to get away from him again.

He squeezed my dick hard enough that it hurt and slammed my head harder into the prep table.

The table scraped against the floor with the force of his administration, and I winced as the legs thudded into the dead man who had fallen to the ground on the other side.

“Straight, hmm? Me too,” he growled into my ear as he increased the pace of his strokes. My traitorous balls zipped up, and he gently ran his fingers over them, his lips curling against my ear in satisfaction.

I thrashed again, losing more hair to his punishing grip as he cupped my balls and danced his fingers deeper under my hips until he was stroking my asshole.

“No, stop... Don’t touch me there,” I groaned, trying to jerk away from his wandering fingers. He didn’t penetrate me, but why was I pressing back into him like I wanted him to?

“I’m so fucking straight, Ryan. I can’t wait to fuck your tight little pussy.”

An alarming thrill rushed through me. Was it fear? *Excitement?* Apprehension? My cock leaked at his filthy words, and he pulled his hand out of my boxers. He held his palm up to where my face was pressed against the table.

“Spit in my hand,” he ordered. I tried to shake my head, but he snarled. “That wasn’t a request, Ryan. Spit in my fucking hand, or I’ll spit in your perfect mouth.”

Unable to stop myself from moaning again, my cock throbbed and dripped under the table. I could barely think as Cal ground his own rock-hard dick into my ass.

Closing my eyes, I did as he said, spitting into his palm and getting it wet with my saliva. I wasn’t sure if I was relieved or enraged when he wrapped his now slick hand back around me.

He stroked me firmly, his soaked palm gliding smoothly up and down my shaft. My whole body tensed up as I felt my orgasm start to grow at the base of my cock.

My breathing sped up, and I was suddenly panting again.

“That’s it, straight boy. Come for me.”

“No. Fuck you!” I spat, and he chuckled.

“You’re going to come, Ryan; there’s no point in fighting it. You’re going to shoot your load all over that bitch’s corpse, then you’re going to clean it up like the good boy I know you are.”

He was everywhere, all around me. His minty breath was tickling my skin, his hard chest pressed into my back. His hands were in my hair and on my cock. Everything about the way he held me down screamed dominance and ownership.

My whole body was on fire, and I seemed to have lost my ability to form a coherent thought. He was right about one thing; there was no use in fighting it. My body was literally spasming beneath him, but no matter how hard I struggled, he kept up that same relentlessly methodical rhythm,

Up and down, up and down, up and down.

“Cal... please, fuck!” I panted, but he just laughed again and continued to stroke me until my dick swelled in his hand.

“That’s it, baby. Make a mess. Show me how fucking straight you are,” he purred just as everything came to an explosive head.

My cock erupted in his hand, and I choked and groaned as I came and came and came. Hot cum shot from me in spurts. I was glad I couldn’t see the shame of my own release, as I was sure it had hit the dead man who was currently lying on the floor.

Cal continued to stroke me until my balls were completely empty. All the strength left my body, and I slumped weakly against the table. I was too drained to fight when he finally released his grip on my hair. He tugged down my surgical mask, leaving a soft, unwelcome kiss on my lips. I groaned and jerked away from him, but this time he let me.

I stumbled away from the table, clumsily tucking my spent cock back into my pants. He was staring at me without a single hint of amusement on his face, his dark eyes burning with an emotion I didn’t understand.

“Call me that again, and I’ll take your fucking ass next time,” he threatened. He didn’t sound angry, but he didn’t sound like his usual self either. It was like he was dead inside.

I ripped up my zipper with shaking fingers as he watched me coolly. Suddenly, I remembered the ghoulish lady that had attacked me the night before.

‘*Devil boy!*’ she had screeched at me. She had said Cal was her son... If that nightmare of a woman was his mother, then who knew what kind of upbringing he had suffered through.

Calling him the devil had clearly triggered him, and I had paid for it with that humiliating handjob.

What the fuck had that been all about?

Cal cut me a cold glare and gestured to the crooked prep table and the mangled body sprawled out on the floor.

“Clean this up,” he ordered, then, without another word, he left.

OceanofPDF.com

21



Cal Walker

The second I left Ryan's, I regretted my decision to abandon him. I almost immediately wanted to go back and apologize.

Operation 'Win Ryan's Heart' was off to one of the rockiest starts to ever rockily start. I definitely shouldn't have forced him to come all over my victim's dead body...I also probably shouldn't have left him to clean it up alone... *nope*. That was the dumbest shit I had ever done, and I had done some epically stupid stuff in my twenty-six years of life.

I groaned out loud as I drove to the townhouse I shared with Naomi, dropping my head back into the leather seat of my G-Wagon.

On top of me being an idiotic, impulsive asshole—I was still nursing a massive hard-on. The memory of Ryan's perfect dick pulsing in my hand was almost too much for me to handle. The deep masculine grunts and moans that had escaped his gorgeous throat would fucking haunt me for the rest of my life.

I wondered what sorts of sounds he would make when I finally rammed my dick up his tight, virgin ass?

Jesus, Cal! GET IT TOGETHER!

If I didn't make it up to him somehow, there was no way he was ever going to let me anywhere near his ass... not that he had really wanted me to stroke his cock today either... like I said. Not one of my finest moments.

I wasn't usually like this.

Ok... I was.

Kind of.

I was always a pushy dom that demanded obedience, but I usually had a willing sub to exact my sadistic will upon.

Ryan had certainly not been willing, but I hadn't been able to stop. Even though he had begged me to stop... more than once.

That was bad.

I *knew* what I had just done was bad, but I had no idea what to do about it.

"This is a fucking mess... and not in a hot way," I grumbled to myself as I pulled into my driveway and hopped out of the vehicle.

I scowled at the sight of my fire-crotch red Aston Martin parked across the street. It appeared Vox had wasted no time cashing in on his reward for checking on my sister while I was gone.

Bastard.

I walked up my professionally manicured front walkway, nodding at the massive collection of garden gnomes on my way before unlocking my front door.

We had several locks because I'm a paranoid nutcase who breaks into people's homes for a living. We also had an alarm system that Vox keeps up to date for me, so even professional hackers would have a hard time breaching our system.

After sliding open the final bolt, I stepped into the house and sighed happily.

Home sweet home.

Passing the enormous gnome-shaped umbrella stand, I didn't bother taking off my combat boots as I made my way toward the living room where Naomi was usually waiting for me.

We had lived in this townhouse for sixteen years. Cass had only moved out recently, but this is more or less where we grew up after we had escaped our mom's house.

It was nice, with marble tile floors and white walls, and I had just paid someone to renovate the kitchen recently after Naomi had gone on a serious HGTV kick.

So now we had waterfall marble counters and Edison bulb pendant lighting, which seemed to make her happy.

We also had a *shit ton* of gnomes because both Cass and I had a habit of picking them up whenever we were out.

Gnomes for Naomi.

She pretended to hate it, but her eyes sparkled every time we introduced her to the newest addition.

Sure enough, I found her on the couch in the living room. She was curled around her favorite gnome-shaped Squishmallow and glaring at the sunkissed vampire that was my best friend.

Vox was at the kitchen table with his laptop set up, though he wasn't staring at the computer.

He was glaring back at Naomi, his lips drawn in a tight line.

I frowned.

"Hey, kids, I'm home!" I declared, hoping to lighten the decidedly tense and awkward mood.

Naomi immediately abandoned her glaring match with Vox and beamed at me, which only made Vox narrow his eyes further.

"What's going on in here? You two have fun?"

"Not really. Your friend is a joyless grump. Why'd you send him, anyway? I don't need a babysitter."

I shot Vox a quizzical glance, but he wasn't even looking at me. He slammed his laptop shut and stood up, sliding the device into his black Jansport backpack.

Scowling, he stalked past me toward the front door.

"Hey man, thanks for watching out for her!" I called after him, but he didn't look back; he just flipped me off and slammed the door behind him. I whirled to face Naomi, cocking my head to the side.

"What'd you do to piss old Voxy off?" I asked, though I was more amused than anything.

She rolled her eyes. "Oh, *please*. He showed up pissed off. It's not my fault he's shit with communication."

I raised an eyebrow. "I'm not sure it's his fault either. He can't speak, I'm pretty sure it's a trauma thing."

She shot me a look that said, ‘*Don’t make excuses for him.*’

“You don’t need to *spea*k to communicate, Cal. He was being a stubborn ass.”

“That *does* sound like him,” I mused, moving to the fridge to see if we had anything to drink.

“Whatever. I don’t want to talk about him. What are you doing home so early? I figured if you sent a babysitter, you were going to be out late.”

I grabbed an ice-blue sports drink and cracked the top open, slurping back a sip before turning and leaning against the counter to face her.

“He wasn’t a *babysitter*, Gnomes. I just hadn’t been home in a few days and wanted to send someone to make sure you were alright. I know you can take care of yourself.”

She brightened at this, looking adorable with her Squishmallow and little daisy clips in her blonde hair.

I was definitely overprotective of her, but I also didn’t want to smother her, not like Cass did. Cass was afraid of letting anything happen to Naomi, whereas I believed in making sure she learned how to protect herself in case anything ever *did* happen to her.

I couldn’t be with her all the time to protect her, so I felt better knowing that she knew basic self-defense. Also, as much as I could be, I was pretty forthcoming with Naomi about who I was and what I did for a living. She knew I killed people professionally, and because of that, she wasn’t under the delusion that the world was a safe, kind place.

“Cool! So, did you get that kid’s parents? When are we going out again?” she asked excitedly, and my mouth twitched.

Little blood-thirsty heathen.

“Yeah, I got him. It was the dad... I have to meet Cass tomorrow morning at that funeral home to give the kid to the mom... *fuck!*” I dropped my head into my hand and pinched the bridge of my nose.

With everything that had happened with Ryan, I had *completely* forgotten to tell him about Caleb’s mom...*shit!*

“What! What happened?” Naomi asked, and I groaned, glancing up at her.

“I fucked up,” I admitted, and she laughed.

“Naturally.”

“I’m serious. I did something really stupid, and I don’t know what to do about it. Ugh! He’s probably never going to speak to me again!”

Leaving my drink on the counter, I dragged myself to the loveseat sitting opposite Naomi's couch and collapsed face first, burying my face in a bright yellow pillow.

"Who's not going to speak to you again?" she asked.

"The hottest, most spooky ginger boy I've ever met," I grumbled, my voice coming out muffled, considering I was ear-deep in a throw pillow.

"You met a boy?"

"Define '*met*.' I'm stalking him... or I was... I think I still am." I rolled on my side to look at her, giving her my most pitiful '*feel sorry for me*' face.

"You're going to need to give me some context here, Cal. I have no idea what you're talking about." She giggled, and I sighed.

"Fine. So, remember when we followed that kid to the funeral home yesterday? Well, this guy *owns* it."



NAOMI WAS LITERALLY ON THE EDGE OF HER SEAT FOR THE WHOLE STORY. I didn't hold anything back, not even when I got to the part where I had totally lost my marbles in the prep room. She was nineteen, plus I'm sure she'd read more raunchy shit than an out-of-pocket hand job in the dark romances she was always binging.

"Cal, that's... super fucked up. Non-con is not cute in real life."

"I KNOW!" I whined, tossing my head back and rubbing my hands down my face. "I totally shit the bed. But he called me the devil, and I blacked out for a minute. It was like I just needed to fucking *dominate* him. If I could take it back, I would."

"So do it, take it back. Apologize."

I shot her an unenthused look. "And what am I supposed to say? Sorry I held you down and forced you to bust a nut all over my dead victim?"

Naomi giggled. "Well, yeah. For starters. You should also probably apologize for leaving him alone to dispose of *your* body. Maybe explain the trigger thing so he understands. It's not really an *excuse*. You can't use your mental health as a valid reason for being a huge dingus, Cal. You still owe him and will need to make it up to him... but at least it will help him understand why you totally lost your mind."

I sighed. She was right.

“He’s not going to even want to talk to me after what I did.” I pouted, and she shrugged.

“Probably not, but from what you’ve told me so far, I’m not sure how that’s any different from all your other interactions. Seems to me like he hasn’t wanted to talk to you since you met him.”

I pouted harder. Again, she was right, and I hated it.

“You’re both going to *have* to interact anyway, for Caleb’s sake. But after that, the right thing to do would be to leave him alone if he doesn’t want to have a relationship with you, Cal.”

“That’s not fair! I want him,” I complained, and she rolled her eyes.

“Well, then you’re going to have to convince him to want you too, or I will have to officially start judging you for the first time in like... ever. You can’t be a vigilante who kills child abusers and then turn around and abuse innocent people yourself, Cal. It’s hypocritical.”

I narrowed my eyes on her. “How did you get so wise?” I asked, getting up and crossing over to her side of the room. Grabbing her head, I tilted it to the side so I could check her ears.

“Do you just stuff the knowledge in through here? I know you’re not learning this much from reading. All you read is smut.”

She laughed and tried to pull back, but I started tickling her until she squealed. I let her kick me away and grinned down at her.

She wrinkled her nose at me and flipped me off, making me chuckle.

“Alright so, you think I should go back?”

“What, like, to his house? Maybe you should text him first.”

“I don’t have his number.”

She rolled her eyes at me. “*Please*. You’re telling me the big bad mercenary can’t get his number? *I* could probably get his number. I bet it’s listed on his website.”

I flicked her nose. “See? *Wise*.” I smirked before whipping out my phone. She was right, of course. Right there on the *Contact Us* page of Fairview Funeral Services was both the business number and a fucking mobile number right under his handsome businessman headshot.

Good lord. If he ever let me within ten feet of him again, we would need to have a conversation about minimizing our digital footprint.

I mean, yes, I get it. You own a business and want to be easily found online... but you list your personal *mobile* number on the contact page?

I tutted my tongue. He was basically *begging* for dick pics.

Unable to contain the shit-eating grin that was spreading across my face, I glanced back up at Naomi.

“You going to be okay if I head back out for a bit?” I asked, and she nodded, reaching for the remote to the TV and her e-reader, which were lying next to her.

“Sure, I get so much more reading done when you’re not here to pester me,” she snarked, and I laughed.

“Alright. Text me if you need me. And lock the doors!” I shouted over my shoulder as I headed back out.

“I always do, you mother hen!”

I smirked. “Loooove youuu!”

Pausing by the door, I waited to see if she would say it back, but she just giggled in her adorable Naomi way.

“Get out of here, you goofball. Go get your man back.”

For a moment, I felt the usual swell of disappointment and worried that maybe my mother *had* been right.

Maybe I really was the devil, and that was why no one ever said they loved me back.

But then, my busy brain focused on two words she had said that made me forget all about my stupid trauma.

My man.

She called Ryan *my man*. I could get used to that.

I would text Ryan first, but I was sure he would probably ignore me. Naomi was right; I needed to talk to him about Caleb regardless, so I would try to do things the right way this time. But if he didn’t answer, I might need to commit one more B&E before I forced myself to back off...

This was probably my last chance to convince him to let me in, and I wasn’t going to waste it.

22



Ryan Fairview

Cleaning up the mess Cal had left me with was oddly... calming. It was a lot easier to pretend that the man on my table was just another client without Cal's domineering ass leering over me.

The shameful evidence of my orgasm had been easy enough to get rid of. Most of it had hit the plastic that was still clinging to the corpse, so once I disposed of that, it was like it never happened.

I needed to pretend it hadn't happened because if I let myself spiral and overthink like I normally did, I would be forced to acknowledge just how much I had *liked* having that man's hands on me. Which was *crazy*.

I was Ryan Fairview. I ran a fucking funeral home. My job was exceptionally serious while also somehow totally abnormal.

It was extremely important that people believed I was stable, level-headed, and responsible. They were trusting me with the death of their loved ones. I was already strange enough as it was with the whole '*I can see dead people thing*.' I didn't need to add '*sexually confused masochist*' to the list of things people said about me behind closed doors.

That wasn't even true! Was it?

I wasn't sexually confused. It was just because he scared the shit out of me, and fear turned me on... I was still straight... right?

'Come for me, straight boy.'

I shuddered as Cal's words echoed through my mind. Would someone who was straight come for another man, even if they had a weird thing for fear?

Why would I like it so much if I was straight? Why didn't I want Joanna to do the same thing to me?

I tried to imagine it, Joanna's dainty feminine hand on my cock, and... nothing. Not even a twitch.

I scowled down at my dick in frustration as I diligently went through the process of searching the body for pacemakers or any other medical devices that might harm my cremator.

Traitor.

Why couldn't I be turned on by nice, safe Joanna? Why was it the fucking murderous, punk mercenary with zero boundaries that kept making me so hard?

What the fuck was wrong with me?

Forcing away these confusing thoughts, I focused on the task at hand. I went through the cremation process and found it was much easier to do when it was off the books.

No paperwork, no worrying about what outfit the family wanted him burned in. Once I had made sure he didn't have anything explosive on him, I preheated the chamber.

Then I loaded him up, closed the door, and set a timer for three hours. Some of the newer models were faster, but ours took a while to completely burn down. I had been saving up for some upgrades because of this; however, I didn't mind the wait time so much right at that moment.

It gave me a ton of time to clean up my prep room and make sure I had all my loose ends tied up for Ms. Thompson's service the following day.

My mother returned with Caleb around dinner time. I had heated up some leftover spaghetti for myself, and thankfully, Iris informed me they had already eaten.

She let me know she would get Caleb ready for bed, and I nodded, wondering what we were going to do with this kid now that I had his father burning to ashes in my cremator.

“Good night, Ryan!” Caleb said shyly, and I smiled at him, depositing my dirty dish in the sink.

“Night, Caleb. Sweet dreams,” I replied, but I frowned. He was staring at me with a confused look on his face. “What’s wrong?”

“What happened?” he asked softly, pointing to his cheek while staring directly at mine. I touched a hand to my face and winced, remembering that Cal had hit me *extremely* hard in the face.

Fuck!

“Oh, nothing. I fell down some steps. I’m ok, though,” I lied, not liking the way Caleb’s eyes were filling with tears.

“Steps? No one... hit you?” he asked, his voice so soft and broken it made my stomach hurt. He was worried someone was hitting me like his dad hit him...

I crouched down, wiped a tear off his cheek, and gave him a reassuring smile.

“No, no one hit me. I’m okay. It was just an accident.” I felt horrible lying to him, but in that moment, I would have said just about anything to make him smile again. I hated the haunted look of fear swimming in his eyes.

“Okay...” he finally said. “Hey, Ryan?”

“Yeah, Caleb?”

“Can my momma come stay here with us, too? He hurts her more than he hurts me, and it’s scary,” Caleb whispered, and my cheek throbbed in response to the sudden tensing of my jaw.

His mom?

Iris wrapped her hands around his shoulders and tugged him away.

“Come on, sweet boy, time for bed,” she chimed, and he smiled up at her before casting one last look at me.

“Please?”

I swallowed. “Let me look into it,” I told the kid, having no idea where to even start with his request. I hadn’t even thought about his mother, which was stupid. Obviously, he had one...

Immediately after Iris took Caleb up to bed, I made a beeline for the main floor bathroom. I flicked on the light and immediately groaned out loud.

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

I had a massive shiner coming in from where Cal had hit me. I couldn't look like I had just gotten the shit kicked out of me when I was running a funeral service the following day!

"Shit!" I exclaimed out loud, leaning on the sink and poking at my tender cheek, which was already turning black and blue from where Cal's fist had connected with my face.

I was in full-blown panic mode. People were going to talk for sure... How would I get this covered up? I didn't have makeup that worked on living people. Everything I used on my clients was designed to sit well on cold skin. It wouldn't work on my face.

Should I ask my mom for makeup or something?

I ran my hand down my face and winced in pain as my palm passed over the bruise.

Don't ask me why I was more concerned about what people would think than the reason I had the damn bruise in the first place.

I had clearly lost my fucking mind.

Suddenly, my pocket started vibrating.

What now?

If Theo got her ass kicked and needed me to come patch her up, I was going to lose it. I had my hands full enough as it is without taking care of someone who voluntarily got their face beat in every night...

UNKNOWN:

Ginger snapppppppp. I fucked up. I'm so sorry.

My blood turned ice cold in my veins, and my hand began to tremble.

No. Absolutely not.

This asshole needed to get OUT of my life! I never wanted to see him ever again. This was too much. How had he gotten my number? Jesus fucking Christ... now I was going to need to get a whole new phone plan...

I made my way to the front door and peeked out the window. It was dark out, but from where I was standing, I couldn't see a Bentley or that crazy SUV he had been driving earlier. I checked that the front door was locked before making my way to the back.

His cars weren't there either. I locked that door as well before methodically checking each of the windows.

UNKNOWN:

Ginger snap, answer me. I said I'm sorry.

UNKNOWN:

Can I come in?

UNKNOWN:

I need to talk to you about the kid.

UNKNOWN:

Also, I should probably apologize in person. That was not cool earlier; you have to let me explain...

RYAN:

Leave me alone. I never want to see you again. If you come anywhere near my house, I'll call the police.

UNKNOWN:

Ok

UNKNOWN:

First of all

UNKNOWN:

Calling the police is a bad idea for like...* so * many reasons.

UNKNOWN:

And second of all, like I said, I legit need to talk to you about the kid. I have his mother, and I was hoping to swing by with her in the morning to reunite them.

This caused me to pause.

Cal had the kid's mother?

I frowned at my phone as I made my way upstairs to check the windows on the second floor. I beelined for my bedroom, scratching the back of my neck.

I definitely never wanted to see this asshole again, but reuniting Caleb and his mother was honestly the best-case scenario. No kidnapping charges for me, and he would be with someone who loved him and cared about him.

Based on what he had said earlier, it sounded like his mom was just as much of a victim as he was...

RYAN:

Fine. You can bring her by in the morning before the service we have scheduled. But I never want to see you again after that.

UNKNOWN:

Can I come by now to apologize, at least?

RYAN:

No! I don't want to be alone with you! I have a massive bruise on my face from where you hit me. It's completely inappropriate. Tomorrow is going to be a nightmare because of you!

I opened the door to my room, still scowling at my phone. I waited for the three dots to appear to indicate he was writing back when a familiar deep voice filled my dark room.

“Too late. I’m already here.”

OceanofPDF.com

23



Ryan Fairview

“What the fuck!” I barked, nearly jumping out of my skin when I looked up to find Cal’s massive form silhouetted in the bay windows of my room.

He had his hood up, but his face was exposed, and his bandana was nowhere to be seen. The warm light from one of the street lamps outside illuminated his face enough that I could see his eyes no longer had that dead, empty glaze to them. They were warm and full of remorse again and maybe a tiny hint of amusement.

“I have to say, I’m relieved that you find the fact that I punched you in the face more inappropriate than the fact that I jerked you off.” He grinned at me, and I sputtered in fury.

“We will *not* be talking about *the other thing that happened!* As far as I’m concerned, that never happened, and it never will again!” I spun on my heel and was about to storm out of the room when he suddenly had his hands on me again.

Wrapping a large hand around my bicep, he spun me back around and pushed me back against the door. It clicked shut behind me, and I let out a strange growling noise that I had never made before.

“Get your fucking hands off me, you pervert!” I hissed, and to my surprise, he immediately let me go, holding both hands up as if to show me he meant no harm.

“Listen, I just want to talk. I need to explain—”

“I don’t want you to explain! I want you to get the fuck out of my life!”

He winced as if I had struck him, and for some reason, his wide brown eyes stirred a strange feeling in my gut. How could someone so fucked up and dangerous look so vulnerable?

“Ryan... please? Can I just talk to you for a second?” His voice was softer than I had ever heard it. He wasn’t making jokes or being sarcastic. The way he said my name made it feel like he *needed* me to hear him out.

I stared at him for a long moment, and he nibbled on his lip ring, almost like he was... *nervous*?

I narrowed my eyes and crossed my arms over my chest.

“Fine. You have two minutes. Go.”

He winced again.

“Can we sit down?”

“No.”

“Okay, fine... well. First of all, I wanted to start off by saying that I’m sorry for... *forcing* myself on you like that. No matter which way you swing, that wasn’t cool at all. I just... You called me that name, and I have a lot of fucked up trauma around it,” he muttered. He wasn’t looking at me anymore. He was awkwardly rubbing the back of his neck beneath his hoodie and staring at his feet as if he were ashamed to tell me that he had any sort of weakness.

He looked so young all of a sudden, like a little lost boy who just needed someone to listen to his story, and I felt myself softening against my better judgment.

“Do you want to talk about it?” I asked, surprising myself with how gentle my tone was.

He glanced up at me, looking just as shocked as I was that I had bothered to ask.

“Umm... I won’t bore you with the details, but my mom used to call me that when I was a little kid. She wasn’t a very nice lady.”

So I was right. That phantom woman was his mother, and she had definitely been abusive when she was alive.

"She's a big reason I do what I do."

I narrowed my eyes. "And what exactly is it that you do?" I asked.

Cal sighed. "If I'm going to get into this, you should really sit down. It's a long story, and you've had a rough day."

"Yeah, no shit. I've had a rough couple of days, thanks to you," I snapped, and he winced again.

"I know. Please sit down? I promise I'll keep my hands to myself," he said, gesturing to my massive California King.

I'm not sure what possessed me to humor him, but I did. I stalked to the end of my bed and sat down, watching him warily as he paced back and forth in front of me.

"So... where do I start..." He was muttering, and I had to admit, he was cute when he was like this. It was like I could almost see his thoughts scattered in a disorganized mess outside his brain, and he was fishing through the mess for the right thing to say to me.

"So my mother was an absolute piece of work. When my sisters and I were little kids, she used to keep us locked in the basement in cages."

I choked.

Cages!?

I tried to speak but inhaled the wrong way and suddenly couldn't stop coughing.

"Ginger snap? You okay?" Cal rushed forward and slapped my back aggressively as I tried to remember how to breathe.

I waved him off, still struggling to get the spit out of my lungs.

"Wh-what?" I exclaimed. "She kept you in *cages*? Like with bars and a lock?"

He nodded, looking disturbingly calm as he continued to explain.

"Yeah. Sometimes, she would forget to feed us for days. My younger sister, Naomi, was only three years old. My older sister and I were so scared Naomi was going to die from neglect, so we broke out and tried to escape.

"We... Well, I ended up killing our mother. It was self-defense, so we didn't get in trouble when the police found us, but...yeah. It was a really shitty time in my life."

"No fucking kidding," I managed, completely unable to wrap my head around the fact that someone could be so cruel to their own children.

“So you see, when you called me... *that word*... It brought up some real garbage memories of a time when I had zero control over my own circumstances. My reflex was to get the threat under control... It just made me need to... *dominate* you.” He looked like the words felt like glass coming out of his mouth.

I raised a skeptical eyebrow at him. “And you needed to dominate me by doing...*that*?”

He shrugged. “Honestly, if you were anyone else, I probably would have just killed you. I think I did that because, if you haven’t noticed, I have a huge crush on you.”

My mouth fell open at the brazenness of his admission.

Who just went around saying shit like this to people? Especially to complete strangers?

This man had no boundaries. He had literally no idea what an appropriate way to interact with people was, and I guess after what he had just told me, I could understand why.

What kind of upbringing did he have after he had escaped someone so evil?

I wasn’t sure I even wanted to know the answer to that. I already felt like he had shared more than I had any business knowing.

Understanding that it wasn’t his fault that he was the way he was made it a little bit easier for me to forgive him for everything he had done since I had met him, but still. He was *dangerous*. There was no place in my life for someone like him.

“Well, you’re going to need to get over your crush, Cal,” I said sternly, and he looked like he was about to legitimately pout at my words.

“It’s not reciprocated, and I’m straight.” There was a strange little niggling feeling in my head that told me I was lying through my fucking teeth, but I ignored it. Even if I was willing to admit that everything I had believed to be true about myself was a lie, I could never pursue a relationship with someone like this. It would ruin my life.

I had worked so hard to get to where I was. I wasn’t about to throw that all away just because this man was looking at me like I had the power to break his heart.

“Okay... can we at least be friends then?” he asked, shuffling closer to me. His gaze fell to the bruise on my cheek, and he frowned, nibbling on his lip ring.

I sighed, rubbing the corners of my eyes.

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"Come on, please? I'm a great friend! Just ask anybody... Well, maybe not anybody. You can ask my buddy Vox... He doesn't really speak, but if you ask him if I'm a good friend, he'll at least give you a thumbs up to confirm."

Suddenly, a strange feeling welled in the back of my throat, and before I could stop it from happening, I laughed.

You would have thought Christmas had come early, the way Cal's entire face lit up.

"You have a nice laugh." He said, taking another tentative step toward me.

I forced myself to sober and shook my head to shake off the overwhelming urge to smile at him.

He was really fucking cute when he was like this. Like a golden retriever begging for a milk bone...

Okay. Maybe I should stay away from the *bone* references when referring to Cal.

"Come on, Ryan. Please? Let me be your friend."

"Why do you want to be my friend so bad?" I honestly couldn't understand this man's obsession with me. No one was ever obsessed with me. Theo was the attractive one. She was the badass who signed up for underground fights and made all the girls drop their panties. I was just the creepy dude who spent more time with the dead than the living. No one ever wanted to get to know *me*.

Cal looked at me like I was crazy.

"What do you mean? You're cool as fuck! Look at this spooky ass house you live in! It's so rad! You know, most people would have probably renovated this place and made it into some sterile, modern version of what it is, but you haven't. You kept it the way it was, and it's honestly one of the coolest buildings I've ever been in."

I gaped at him. He thought I was... *cool*? Literally no one has *ever* thought that about me. Especially not someone like Cal. Cal looked like an older version of a lot of the kids who had always picked on me in high school.

Tattooed, jacked bad boys who were too cool to show up to class and never seemed to worry about good grades.

A strange, warm feeling twisted in my stomach at the fact that he thought I was cool.

“Uhm. Thanks... I guess? I wouldn’t be able to afford to renovate this place anyway,” I mumbled. I could barely scrape together enough to update my crematorium.

“Oh! About that, that’s another perk about being my, uhm, *friend*. Here, this is for earlier,” he said, digging deep into his hoodie’s pocket and pulling out a giant wad of cash.

He dropped the money into my hand, and my cheeks flushed as I realized he was paying me for... what exactly?

Giving me a handjob?

Humiliation and rage bubbled in my chest, burning away any good feelings that had been growing.

I glared at him, and he looked confused for a moment before realization dawned on him.

“Oh shit! No, no, no, this isn’t for *that*! This is for taking care of that body. That’s another thing I’m sorry about. I shouldn’t have left you to deal with that by yourself. I hope the money helps make up for it.”

I relaxed slightly, but I still wasn’t sure I liked the idea of getting paid to dispose of a murder victim’s body. It made it all feel too real.

Though looking at this stack of cash, I gasped as I realized it was all hundred dollar bills. I was holding *thousands* of dollars in my hands right now. This was more than enough to fix my cremator, which would allow me to take in way more service requests.

Plus, that guy was an abusive asshole who hit Caleb. He totally deserved what he got. I was surprised to find that I didn’t really feel any guilt about helping Cal get rid of him. If anything, I was happy that he couldn’t hurt Caleb anymore.

“Okay... are you sure this isn’t too much?” I asked, still feeling off about accepting payment of any kind from Cal.

“Of course not. How do you think I can afford all my sick cars? Murder pays exceptionally well, Ryan. Know your worth.” He winked at me, and I pursed my lips.

“Does this mean I still have to work for you?”

He sighed. “No, not if you don’t want to. I want you to be my friend because you want to be. But I wasn’t lying before when I said my boss would see you as a loose end if he doesn’t feel like you’re part of the

operation. I can try to protect you, but the people I work for are ruthless. It's way bigger than you can imagine. Even if you relocate, you may never be truly safe from them. If you think you can stomach it and can cremate the odd body for me and stay on the payroll, he probably won't think twice about you."

"Why would you even bother trying to protect me from these people? You don't even know me at all," I said, feeling shaky again. This was *a lot* to absorb in one sitting. I was suddenly feeling glad he had made me sit down.

Cal frowned and stepped closer. I knew I should tell him to stay back, but the words died on my lips. He reached forward and gently skated his thumb over the bruise he had left on my cheek, his dark eyebrows pulling together in a concerned frown.

"I already told you. I really like you. I don't want you to get hurt, and I don't want you to be afraid of me."

I swallowed, resisting the urge to lean into his gentle touch as his eyes locked on mine. "Besides, it's my fault you got dragged into all this in the first place. You gotta believe me that I didn't mean for this to happen. I'm so sorry I put you in this position, Ryan. You deserve better." He tongued his lip ring, and my stomach fluttered with something that felt like anxiety but wasn't.

"Okay, fine. We can *try* to be friends."

The smile that spread across Cal's face made me forget for a moment how insanely bad of an idea this was.

Theo was going to fucking *kill me*.

24



Cal Walker

Alexa, play: Frozen (feat. 070 Shake) - Madonna, Sickick, 070 Shake

After agreeing to let me be his '*friend*,' I left Ryan to sleep. He had narrowed his eyes at me suspiciously when I easily agreed to leave for the night.

I think he was expecting me to try to convince him to let me cuddle him, which... let's be serious, I would have been all over it.

However, I knew I was already pushing my luck with the whole '*friendship*' thing, and I didn't want to push too hard in case he changed his mind.

Besides, I had already bugged his entire house anyway. I had several live camera feeds installed before I even texted him that night. Grinning to myself, I remembered how shocked he had been to find me waiting for him in his bedroom.

I had just finished wiring his bedroom and ensuite, so his timing had been perfect.

As much as I hated the idea of leaving him, he wasn't ready for me to invade his life on that level yet. Constant video surveillance of my little ginger snap would have to do for now, at least until I could convince him that he was in love with me.

Because I didn't want to be *friends* with Ryan Fairview. I wanted to be much more than that. I wanted his face to light up instead of darkening when he saw me. I wanted him to let me touch him whenever I wanted. I wanted to hold his hand in public and kiss him until he felt dizzy.

The shock on his face when I told him I liked him had broken my heart. He looked like he couldn't believe anyone would think that way about him, which was just *crazy* to me.

I was going to change that. By the time I was done with Ryan, he was going to see himself the same way I did.

It was just going to take time.

Baby Steps.

Hopping back in my G-Wagon, I flipped on the app that showed me the live feed to Ryan's house. Flipping through the feeds to make sure they were all working as they should, I settled on the one that showed me his bedroom.

His room was huge, and the four-poster California King had more than enough space for two. My kinky little mind started swirling with fantasies of how good Ryan would look tied up and at my mercy in that bed.

The fact that fear seemed to turn him on excited the shit out of me. There were tons of things I would love to do to him to show him just how fun a fear kink could be. However, something told me he had never experimented or explored anything other than vanilla, straight sex. I wasn't even convinced he had a ton of experience with straight sex.

Once I had gotten to know him better, I would grill him more on his sexual history. Despite the fact that bending him over that prep table and forcing him to come for me was obviously *wrong*, he had clearly been enjoying it on some level.

The sounds he had made and the way he had thrust his hips into my hand had made me so fucking hard for him. I rubbed my palm over the front of my jeans at the thought as I watched Ryan get ready for bed on my phone.

I still hadn't busted a nut from that little altercation, and my balls were full of an aching need for the red-headed man who was playing hard to get.

I was about to talk myself out of rubbing one out in the front seat of my car when Ryan made his way into the ensuite, stripping off his t-shirt as he went.

My mouth watered at the sight of his perfect chest and tight abs. He had a sharp, gorgeous V that disappeared into his jeans. He passed the line of sight to the camera I had installed, so I flipped to my feed of his ensuite, nearly groaning out loud as he undid his pants. Hungrily, I watched him step out of them on his way to the large walk-in shower.

That was another place I would love to fuck him. The shower was large enough for three grown men; even with my size, it would be more than enough space for us to play. I watched as he turned the shower on. Finally, when he stepped out of his boxers, showing me the perfect globes of his ass, I lost my internal battle with myself.

My dick was literally aching in my pants, and with my free hand, I undid the button on my own jeans and shifted in my seat, pulling my rock-hard cock out.

Wrapping my hand around my shaft, I lazily pumped a few times, sucking on my lip ring as I watched my new obsession fill his hands with soap.

I frowned as he paused. He looked as if he were internally battling with himself for a moment too, and then he did something I totally hadn't been expecting.

He wrapped his hand around his own cock and began to stroke himself.

I perked up immediately. I would have had no problem busting a nut just watching Ryan trace his hands all over his perfect body, but watching him beat off? Fuck, I wasn't going to last more than a few minutes.

My mouth watered as his cock swelled in his hand, and he tugged on it, bracing his other hand on the shower wall.

He closed his eyes, and I watched his mouth move... *fuck*. I needed to hear the sounds he was making.

Scrambling to hit the audio feed before I missed my chance to hear his perfect moans, a dribble of precum slid down my cock and into my hand.

I used it as lube, swiping my thumb over my crown and gliding my hand up and down my dick without looking away from Ryan.

My balls were so fucking stiff and sore. I brushed my fingers over them, massaging them gently and pretending my fingers were Ryan's soft, supple lips.

The audio kicked in, and I was rewarded with a low, grumbly moan that was loud enough that my microphones picked it up over the spray of the shower.

I watched Ryan increase his pace as he stroked himself, and a deep, burning need coiled in the base of my dick as I watched him touch himself.

"That's it, baby," I grunted, matching his pace while I watched. "Show me how you like it."

His stomach muscles tightened, and he curled around himself slightly as he worked his cock. It was so fucking hot I could barely stand it.

"Yeah, baby. That feels good, doesn't it? Show me how good you look when you come." I growled, even though he couldn't hear me. I hadn't been able to see his entire face earlier, just the side of his head when I held him down.

"Cal..."

An explosion of pleasure rocked through my abdomen as Ryan's grainy voice crackled through the speaker of my phone,

Had he just... said my name?

My hand paused on my throbbing cock as I strained to hear him. He was furiously working himself now, and he moaned again, thrusting his hips forward into his hand.

"Cal, I'm going to fucking come," he moaned, and I sat forward in my seat, my heart suddenly pounding in my chest.

Was he... fantasizing about me while he beat off?!

Pride swelled through me, and I hastily went back to work on my own dick. I wanted nothing more than to break back into his house and bend him the fuck over, but I didn't want to risk him rejecting me.

Not when I was about to watch him blow his load with my name on his lips.

"Show me, baby," I whispered to him, dragging my tongue over my lip as I felt my balls tighten. The telltale build-up of heat that meant my orgasm was imminent had me rocking my hips into my hand. "Let me see you explode."

To my absolute delight and shock, Ryan reached behind himself with his free hand. My mouth dropped open as he slid his fingers in between his

asscheeks. His entire body locked up with pleasure as he fingered himself.

“Fuck, Cal... just like that!” Ryan whined as his cock began spurting in his hand.

“*Fuuuuckkk!*” I groaned out loud as my own dick began to throb and pulse. I had to drop the phone in the passenger seat to catch the cum in the bottom of my T-shirt, keeping it from spraying all over the windshield and my steering wheel.

I grunted and groaned as my cock continued to empty, and I turned my head so I could watch Ryan stroke himself through his own orgasm on the passenger seat.

Fuck, this was the longest orgasm I had ever had...

When I was finished, I was so blissed out that I could barely move. My body was buzzing with excitement and the floating feeling that came after such a strong release.

I gathered up my phone, tenderly stroking my thumb over the screen as I watched Ryan through the feed.

My heart dropped at the look on his face. He didn’t look blissed out. He looked stressed. Like what he had just done was a mistake.

“What the fuck is wrong with me?” I heard him ask himself as he shook his head beneath the spray of the shower.

“Nothing. Nothing’s wrong with you, baby,” I murmured, hating that I couldn’t tell him that to his face... Well, I *could*, but something told me he would be less than thrilled to find out I was watching him beat off in the shower from my car.

Likely even less thrilled to know I had watched him finger his own asshole while crying out my name.

“I’m going to teach you just how good things can be, ginger snap,” I whispered before tucking myself back into my jeans.

I was just about to head home when my phone buzzed in my hand. I glanced at the notification, frowning.

DAMIAN:

Apex. Now.

What the fuck did *he* want? I wasn’t due for another job for at least two weeks. We usually worked a month or two on, then got a month off between jobs. Damian said it had something to do with maintaining our mental health.

You might be thinking: aww, that's so nice!

It's not. Damian doesn't care about our mental health for our own well-being. He cares about it the way you would care about getting your car an oil change. We were tools to him. Belongings, and he liked to keep his belongings well-tuned.

CAL:

Well, you seem to be in an exceptionally good mood today.
Can't this wait? I have an early day tomorrow.

DAMIAN:

Be here in an hour, or there will be consequences.

Ugh. Fine.

Fucking prick.

Tossing one last glance at my new favorite spooky mansion, I threw the G-Wagon into drive and made my way to Apex.

Hopefully, whatever Damian wanted wouldn't take too long. I needed to get a good night's sleep before seeing my ginger snap again bright and early the following day.

OceanofPDF.com

25



Cal Walker

Apex was located outside of Cleveland, on the outskirts of Cuyahoga Valley National Park. The massive concrete building was set back deep enough into the woods that hikers and lost tourists rarely came across it. Even if the odd nature enthusiast wandered a little farther off the beaten path than most, they were often deterred by the barbed wire chain line fence and armed guards that patrolled the gate 24/7.

The G-Wagon handled the rugged trail leading up to the imposing grey structure without any issues at all. I turned down my dubstep as I rolled up to address one of the guards. He was in all black, wearing Kevlar, and had an MP5 clutched in his hands.

“Sup, McGregor?” I grinned at him, flashing my security pass. McGregor had been with Apex longer than even I had. He still checked my security pass like we were strangers and gave me a scowl.

I winked at him.

“Stop flirting with me, McGregs. You know I can’t resist a man in cargo pants,” I purred, enjoying the way his cheeks flushed red with rage beneath

his macho, straight man, wrap-around shades.

Homophobia ran rampant in military operations, and while we weren't *military* by any means, many of the men and women who ended up here were ex-military, and old habits die hard.

I was pretty open about who I was and probably got away with more than most since I was Ryker's favorite. I think if Vox could talk, he would have warned me against goading the homophobes. Especially considering they were homophobes with guns.

As it was, watching McGregs get all flustered because of a little harmless flirting was funny as fuck, and I really just couldn't help myself sometimes.

My tires crunched over the gravel pathway, and another armed guard opened the underground door to the parking garage for me.

As the highest-paid mercenary here, I had an entire floor dedicated just to me and my bad habit of buying flashy cars... probably another reason I wasn't super popular with the other murder monkeys.

Vox was really my only pal in the industry, and I think it's because he didn't want to be here anymore than I did.

Sure, the money was nice, and I was good at what I did, but if I could retire, I would. Even for a sociopath like me, killing for someone else wasn't exactly my dream job. However, you didn't get to *quit* Apex. Once you were in, you were in. The only way out was in a body bag.

Many of the mercenaries who worked here had sought out Apex and *wanted* to be here. So, understandably, many of these men and women were annoyed that someone like me, who clearly had zero reverence for this place, was shown so much favoritism.

But, hey. It's not my fault they're shit at their jobs. I also couldn't help the fact that Ryker seemed to have a fucking boner for me.

What was I supposed to do?

Like I said, the more I made it clear that I didn't give a fuck about this place, the more Damian seemed to want to sink his dirty ass claws into me.

Maybe he just liked it when I played hard to get. Either way, I didn't take the general animosity I experienced from my peers seriously.

I had Vox in my corner, and he was all I needed.

Speaking of the human vampire, he was leaning against the cement pillar by my empty parking spot as I pulled in.

He was smoking a cigarette directly next to a no-smoking sign, and his silver eyes were dark, meaning something was up.

I hopped out of the G-Wagon and gave him a quizzical look.

“Why so glum, Voxy? The big man in a bad mood?” He pursed his lips and nodded, jerking his head toward the doorway that led out of the parking garage.

“Yeah, he seemed testy when he messaged me. You and I are supposed to be off for another couple of weeks. I’m guessing vacation is getting cut short?” I rambled.

Vox flicked his butt away and shrugged, his expression getting more and more pissed off by the minute.

Vox *hated* Damian, and he had probably only survived so long because of his inability to talk about it. He was just as much of a slave to that man as I was. There were a handful of us who had been plucked out of bad situations as children and groomed. Not all of us had lasted.

Vox and I had been the exception, and when I got old enough to realize that what Damian was doing to kids like us was grooming, I made enough of a stink about it that he stopped.

However, when I first came here, there had been a dozen or so of us. Being Damian’s favorite did have some perks. I had a small amount of sway with him. He would bend sometimes to keep me happy, especially when I had told him I would help him recruit more willing participants into Apex.

That being said, Vox’s sour mood wasn’t anything out of the norm.

Vox hated him so fucking much, and unlike me, he didn’t have any family that Ryker could hold over his head. I honestly didn’t know why he stuck around. Vox was a fucking prodigy when it came to hacking. I was pretty confident that, out of all of us, if Vox wanted to get out of here, he could pull it off.

However, every time I asked him about it, I usually just got a silent scoff or an eye roll in return.



WE GOT TO DAMIAN RYKER'S DOOR, AND I BIT BACK A SIGH AT THE SIGHT of it. Vox stood beside me, and we stared at the industrial handle together for a beat. Then, I shook my head and forced myself to open the door.

I didn't knock, as was the Apex custom. If you didn't want someone to enter a room at Apex, you locked the door. Otherwise, a closed door meant nothing. Even if you were the big cheese.

Vox followed me into the office, close enough on my heels that it was a little annoying. Damian's office was circular in shape and just as windowless and grey as the hallways that led to it. Curved screens lined the wall behind his desk, showing live feeds for every single inch of the facility, including bathrooms and showers. There was an ongoing joke that he sat in here and jerked off to us when he was alone, though no one ever let him hear that.

It would likely be the last thing they ever said.

The man himself was sitting behind his large, plain grey desk. He had three monitors set up that faced away from us, so I couldn't see what he was looking at as he typed away on his wireless keyboard. He also had two picture frames on his desk. They also were facing away from us, but I knew who he had featured in those frames.

He made sure I knew every time I came in here.

He hadn't changed much since the first day I had met him. He was the kind of man that just became more attractive with age. His chestnut hair now just had a few silver streaks in it, but his whiskey eyes were still sharp and full of cunning.

He was dressed in a grey Armani suit, complete with a tie, even though he was the only asshole in here. I resisted the urge to roll my eyes at his obsessive need to look so put together. I think it was a power thing meant to make those around him feel underdressed and inferior.

He didn't look up right away when we entered, even though he had made me drop everything to come to him.

Another common power move, and I heard the faint sound of Vox's knuckles cracking next to me.

I shot him a look that said: *calm the fuck down*.

The last thing I needed was to be up all night patching Vox up for pissing off Damian... which happened more often than I would like.

Damian heard, however, and he glanced up from what he was doing, his eyes narrowing on my friend.

“Is there a problem, Mr. Moretti?” he asked, his voice dripping in honey and venom.

Vox didn’t say or do anything in return; he just stared right back.

I rolled my eyes.

“Jeeze, there’s no problem, Damian. You know he’s just a cranky bastard. What did you need? I told you I have an early start tomorrow,” I said, trying to get his attention away from Vox and back onto me. However, Damian held Vox’s gaze for another beat, the corner of his mouth tilting up in that sadistic way of his.

“You’re dismissed, Mr. Moretti,” Damian said, glancing at me briefly before shooting Vox a look I didn’t understand. “Leave Mr. Walker and I to chat.”

Vox’s lip curled, and his eyes flashed. He took a step closer to me, indicating that he wanted to stay. I frowned at him and brushed him off.

“Get out of here, Voxy. I’ll come find you after,” I muttered, not wanting him to push Damian past the point of no return. Vox met my gaze, and his lips set into a hard line. There was no mistaking the concern twisting in his silver eyes.

“I’ll be fine,” I said firmly. I could handle Damian Ryker, even when he was in a mood. Vox hovered for another beat before glancing back at Damian, who was staring at Vox like he was a cockroach he wanted to crush beneath his shoe.

It was a look he got that said: *I’m your master, you bow to me.*

He didn’t use it on me the same way he did on Vox. It was like he wanted to make Vox feel degraded. Maybe it was because Vox usually returned that look with the one he was wearing now.

Vox’s look said: *Fuck around, and I’ll kill you. I don’t fucking care who you are.*

It just made Damian’s smile grow wider.

Finally, Vox reached over and squeezed the back of my neck the way he sometimes did, knocking his forehead briefly against the side of my head.

It was his way of telling me goodbye and to come find him later. He shot one last glare at Damian before stalking out of the office and slamming the door behind him.

Ryker turned to face me, the amusement slipping off his face.

“Mr. Walker,” he dead-panned.

I rolled my eyes and sighed. “Yeah? What?”

“You have some explaining to do.”

I frowned. What was this about?

“What do you mean?”

Ryker’s expression darkened, and he stood up, placing both hands on his desk as he leaned forward. Suddenly, I felt like I was a little kid again, being reprimanded by him for missing a target during practice.

Despite how much I hated Ryker, there was a small part of me that always wanted to please him. He was the closest thing I had to a father figure, so when he looked at me the way he was now, it always made me feel like I was about an inch tall.

“On your knees, Mr. Walker,” he ordered, and I sighed, ignoring the way my heart rate sped up at his words.

There were no chairs in Ryker’s office, and it was pretty common for him to order me to get on my knees when he called me into a meeting. It was another power move... I knew it was, though it didn’t make it any easier for me to kneel for him.

I hesitated, and his expression darkened further. Reaching into a drawer, he pulled out a 5x7 print before wandering around his desk. He sat on the edge and snatched up one of the picture frames before handing it to me.

I grit my teeth as I took it from him.

“Open the back up. I need to update it, don’t you think?”

Rage was firing off in my chest, and I glanced down at the framed picture of Naomi. This picture had been taken two years ago, and she was smiling directly at me through the frame without a care in the world.

I looked up at him, the edges of my vision turning red with fury.

He wasn’t smiling.

“Open it up, Callum, and put the new picture in so I can be reminded every day of how pretty your sister’s become. How old is she now... nineteen?” he asked, looking down at the print he had taken from his desk drawer.

A potent mix of rage and terror ripped through me when I glanced at it and saw that it had been taken the other day when we had been at the park scouting Caleb.

She was in her cute little sundress with daisy clips in her hair.

Someone had been watching us.

A low growl built in my chest of its own accord and the red that edged my vision spread.

Damian's eyes snapped to mine, his own face tight with fury.

"None of that, Callum. Change the photo, and get on your knees. Then we're going to have a chat about killing my middlemen without clearance." He reached out and picked up the other frame, which had Cass's graduation portrait in it.

"Such beautiful girls," he purred, rubbing his finger over Cass's smiling face.

Forcing the all-consuming rage and fear down, I did as I was told.

Carefully, I opened the back of the frame and replaced Naomi's picture with the more recent one before getting slowly to my knees.

Damian took Naomi's picture from me and made a show about setting her and Cass's frames back on his desk. This time, they were both facing me.

"Now. Let's talk about the missing Honourable Kyle Bradshaw and his wife, Amanda Grey, shall we? It seems you've been a very busy boy, and my investors are *not* happy with how you've recently decided to spend your free time."

26



Cal Walker

The conversation with Damian did not go well.
I was in big shit.

Turns out, Kyle Bradshaw had been a middleman between Apex and another black hat group that ran all sorts of trafficking rings.

The main product they trafficked was drugs. However, they had big stakes in human trafficking as well.

“We had an agreement, Damian,” I growled, though I kept my gaze cast downward as he slowly walked the room, stalking around me like some sort of predator circling its prey.

“I don’t do shit that involves kids. I found ownership papers on the guy’s laptop with missing children listed as the product.”

Damian continued his slow circle around me before coming to stand in front of where I was kneeling. He curled his fingers under my chin and forced my head back to meet his gaze.

He ran his thumb over my lips, and I jerked my head away from him, scowling. I was too angry to play into his fucked up ‘Daddy’ games. My

gaze flitted to the pictures of Naomi and Cass sitting on his desk, and I clenched my fists to hide the tremor that had started in them.

I was *so fucking angry*.

Ryker was pressing the only two buttons that made me see red, and if I didn't think he already had arrangements in place to wipe out my sisters, he would be a fucking dead man right now.

Damian sighed as if I were a disappointment but let his hand drop away from my face.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know," he said, and I glared up at him, not trusting him at all. "Callum, I promise. When I made the deal with them, there was a clause stipulating that Apex didn't deal with child trafficking. If they were running children, it's news to me."

I narrowed my eyes on him. Nothing was *news* to Damian Ryker.

"They had our code on the papers," I snarled. "Why would they use 2739 if they weren't clearing the deal with someone from Apex?"

Damian frowned, rubbing his jawline pensively. "They were using our code? Are you sure that's what you saw?"

"I wouldn't make it up," I snapped. It was difficult to be menacing when I was literally on my knees, and he was towering over me... Which was *exactly* why he made me sit like this.

He wanted to look down on me, to remind me of my place.

"I will look into it. However, in the meantime, I want you to put a stop to your little hobby. I have another job for you that will be taking up much of your focus, anyway."

I opened my mouth to protest, but he walked back to his desk and picked up the picture of Naomi, smiling down at it like he was some sort of deranged, doting uncle.

I almost cracked a fucking molar.

"Several of the higher-ranking officials we have on payroll have been turning up dead. We think it's a vigilante group. A man, maybe ex-police, and another man who's making kills with a tattoo machine of all things." Damian chuckled at this. "It's unclear if they're working together, but they seem to be targeting the same people, so they may be connected."

"They've been working through the ranks, killing some rather influential people that our benefactors have been sorry to lose," Damian said idly, setting the picture of Naomi down on his desk before circling to the other side to sit behind his monitors.

He typed several words into his keyboard, and my phone vibrated in my pocket.

“I have just sent you everything we have on these... *pests*. I would like them eliminated as quickly as possible. Is that understood?”

“What about the child trafficking?” I insisted, doing my best not to glance at the pictures of my sisters.

Damian sighed and leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers. “I told you I would look into it, Callum.”

I scowled at him, and he softened slightly, some of the ice melting in his whiskey eyes.

“I’m serious. I will look into it, and if they are using our code to trade children, I will remind them of the clause in our contract. Other than that, I don’t know what I can do to make it up to you. You know what this business is and the types of people we work with. These things happen.”

I chewed on my lip ring, still too pissed off to respond.

He leaned forward on his desk, crossing his arms and giving me a smile that he had used on me countless times as a child. I had this vivid memory of him taking me out for ice cream after the first time he made me kill someone.

I had never tasted ice cream before, and he let me choose any flavor I wanted. He handed me a massive waffle cone with my disgusting choice of bubblegum and pistachio. The smile he had given me had been so warm and full of pride. No one had ever looked at me like that before. Especially not an adult.

“Tell you what. I’ll let you keep your new pet that you seem to have taken a liking to... what’s his name? Ryan, right? Ryan Fairview?”

An icy spike of anxiety shot through me at Ryan’s name coming out of Damian’s mouth. I narrowed my eyes on him again.

“Maybe if you spent more time paying attention to your investments and less time stalking me on my time off, you would have known about the child trafficking deals going on directly under your nose,” I snarled.

I knew it was inevitable that he would have found out about Ryan. I just hadn’t expected it to be this soon.

The coldness returned to Damian’s eyes, though his smile remained.

“Oh, but Mr. Walker. You’re one of my most important investments. I will always be paying close attention to everything that you do.”

I forced down another wave of fury. It surprised me how angry it made me to hear him refer to Ryan in such a callous manner... as if his life were disposable.

He was treating Ryan like an object, a toy that he could take away from his bratty, unruly child as a punishment if the child refused to behave.

He knew I cared about Ryan on some level, which meant I had just handed him one more way to control me on a silver platter.

Fuck, fuckity, fuck, fuck!

“What do you say, Mr. Walker, do we have a deal? You take care of my vigilante group. In return, I’ll look into the child trafficking and let you continue to play with your funeral director, assuming, of course, you can ensure the man keeps his mouth shut. From what I understand, he knows far too much now not to be considered a loose end.”

Swallowing back all the things I *actually* wanted to say, I nodded.

“Fine,” I snapped, and Damian’s grin widened. He cupped his hand over his ear and put on a mock frown.

“Sorry, Callum. I didn’t understand that. I asked you if we have a deal.”

That tint of red was creeping into my vision again, and I forced myself not to outwardly snarl and instead gave him what he wanted.

“Yes, sir. We have a deal.”

I watched my boss’s eyes flash with an unhinged sort of glee before he nodded.

“Good boy. You’re dismissed.”

27



Ryan Fairview

I woke up to my phone relentlessly buzzing on my nightstand. Groaning, I rolled over to check it. I never got texts like this before my alarm went off. The only people who ever texted me were my sister, my mother, and sometimes Joanna. However, Joanna only texted me a couple times a month, which was more than fine with me.

My heart sank when I saw who it was...

CAL SEX GOD WALKER:

Rise and shine, ginger snap!

CAL SEX GOD WALKER:

*gif of a pink starfish saying 'Today's the day!'

CAL SEX GOD WALKER:

How did you sleep?

CAL SEX GOD WALKER:

Did you dream about me? Were they.... SEXY dreams? *seven smirking emojis*

My cheeks flushed at Cal's texts. I hadn't just dreamed about him... I had beaten off in the shower the night before to the thought of what he had done to me in the prep room.

Humiliation and embarrassment flooded my chest as I remembered how I had experimented with putting my fingers where he had.

I had never done anything like that before.

If I was being honest, I barely even masturbated that much, let alone touch myself... *back there.*

But I couldn't help remembering how Cal had teased me and stroked me while he had his hand wrapped around my cock, and for some reason, it got me off.

What the fuck was happening to me?

My phone buzzed again.

CAL SEX GOD WALKER:

You coming down?

CAL SEX GOD WALKER:

Your mom and I are making waffles!

My mouth dropped open, and the embarrassment I had just been feeling turned to anger. What was he doing in my house...*again!*? A small twinge of panic nipped at me when I realized I might never get rid of him. I had agreed to be his friend the night before, but friends didn't stalk each other and break into their houses!

RYAN:

What do you mean you're making waffles?! And how did your number get saved in my phone? I didn't add you to my contacts.

CAL SEX GOD WALKER:

I saved it there obvi. Bet you didn't know my middle name was 'sex god.' Bahahahahaha!

RYAN:

But HOW did you save it there? Did you not leave after I told you to go?

CAL SEX GOD WALKER:

Wake up Caleb on your way down! His mom will be here soon.

Of course, he evaded the question, though it did make me happy to know that the kid's mom would be here soon.

Learning from my mistakes, I made sure to change out of the cotton pants I normally slept in and pulled on a pair of jeans and a Fairview Funerals T-shirt. I would need to get into a suit later for the service, but for now, I would rather be comfortable... but not so comfortable that Cal would be able to see it every time my dick twitched.

Stopping by Caleb's room on my way downstairs, I told him that breakfast would be ready soon, and he nearly *leapt* out of bed when I informed him we were having waffles.

Feeling a little bitter that Cal's forced waffle date had made him so happy, I did my best to pretend I was excited as well.

We headed downstairs to the sounds of bustling and the scent of maple syrup. Sure enough, when I entered the kitchen, there Cal was, standing in all his 6'4" punk-ass glory in front of a messy waffle iron.

Theo was sitting at the kitchen table in her usual athleisure with a cup of coffee. She had a gash on her cheek that was covered in black and green bruises. It looked like she had tried to tape it together with medical tape, but she really needed glue. It looked like it was going to scar.

I knew better than to ask what happened. It would only piss her off.

My mother was leisurely mixing batter next to Cal, looking like her usual whimsical self in a silk rose gold robe.

Cal spun away from what he was doing to face me with a giant smile on his face, and I had to stop myself from bursting out laughing when I realized he was wearing an apron.

Not just any apron. It was a frilly pink apron that said, '*I put the bitch in obituary.*' My aunt had gotten it for Iris as a gag gift one year, and it had never been worn.

"What kind of toppings do you guys want?" Cal asked enthusiastically, gesturing to several bowls he had laid out on the counter next to the waffle iron.

Caleb ran up to the counter excitedly, standing on his tippy toes to peer at what was available.

"We've got chocolate chips, sprinkles, blueberries, strawberries, caramel sauce, whipped cream..." Cal was rattling off the options to Caleb, who was getting more and more excited by the minute.

“This kid is going to have no teeth left by the time he leaves here,” Theo grumbled, taking a sip of her coffee.

“No kidding,” I agreed, making my way to the coffee maker to pour my own cup. I tried to scowl at the intruder in my house, but I was having a harder time than usual.

Learning about Cal’s past and how he had been treated made him feel like less of a stranger. I didn’t pity him; if anything, I found it commendable that he was still so happy and positive even after surviving such a traumatic experience like that.

I was a grumpy asshole, and sure, my childhood hadn’t been all sunshine and daisies, but at least I had two parents who undoubtedly loved me.

I watched Cal and my mother get Caleb set up with a massive, unhealthy plate full of sugar and carbs just as the doorbell rang.

“I’ll get it,” Iris chimed in before billowing out of the kitchen to answer the door.

Cal perked up. “Ah. That must be my sister, Cassandra. I just call her Cass, though.” He beamed, and Theo scoffed.

“It would seem your sister has more manners than you do,” my sister muttered, obviously referring to the fact that she had chosen to ring the doorbell instead of barging right in.

Cal laughed. “I’m interested to hear if you still feel that way after you meet her.”

I leaned against the counter, sipping my coffee, when Cal bounded over to me.

“Morning, baby. Do you want a waffle?” he asked, and I frowned at him, glancing nervously at Theo, who raised an eyebrow, clearly wondering why this strange man was calling me *‘baby,’*

My cheeks flushed red, and I pushed Cal away.

“Don’t call me that. And no. I don’t want a waffle.”

He pouted and reclaimed the step I had forced him to take back. He looked like he was going to say something else when the swinging door to the kitchen flew open, and the most intimidating woman I had ever seen in my life strode in.

I could immediately tell she was related to Cal. They had matching brown eyes and the same thick dark hair. Both of them had flawless skin,

and the shape of their mouths was identical. However, that was where the similarities ended.

Cassandra Walker's full lips were painted the same knife-wound red as her Christian Louboutins. The heels of her designer shoes cracked like gunshots across our linoleum floors, and she was wearing a pristine blazer over a knee-length pencil skirt. Her Chanel bag alone probably cost more than my entire wardrobe.

Everything about Cassandra Walker screamed: *Don't fuck with me.*

"I would pick your jaw up off the ground, muscles, unless you want her to cut out your tongue." Cal snickered to my sister, and I glanced at Theo.

She was staring at Cassandra with the strangest look on her face, and her mouth was indeed hanging open. Cassandra's eyes slammed into hers, and her scowl deepened.

"And who are *you*?" she asked sharply, looking her up and down critically.

Theo's mouth snapped shut, and she immediately fell back into her usual asshole-ish persona.

"Just someone who fucking lives here," she grumbled, but Cassandra was already moving on. Her sharp, intelligent gaze snapped around the room, briefly settling on Caleb and then landing on me.

"Are you Ryan Fairview?" she said curtly, and I nodded, reaching out a hand.

"Hi, yes. Ryan. Ryan Fairview."

She didn't take my hand. Instead, she looked me up and down critically and sighed.

"You're an idiot, you know that? What would possess you to keep a child in your house like this? You know that's grounds for kidnapping, right?"

I swallowed, suddenly feeling like I was an inch tall. Theo leapt up from her seat, and Cal put himself between his sister and me.

"Hey!" Theo snarled, but Cal brushed her out of the way.

"Back off, Cass. Ryan was just trying to help."

She rolled her eyes. "Yeah, well. The truth fucking hurts."

"Don't talk to my brother like that," Theo growled, but Cass barely flinched.

"Settle down, muscle shirt," she snapped, and I thought for a second that Theo was going to punch her in the face. Theo didn't hit women unless

she was in the ring. However, this one seemed to have found a way directly under her skin.

“Still think she has more manners than me?” Cal asked, his tone somewhat amused, though he was glaring at his sister and had positioned himself directly between myself and her.

Theo didn’t answer. She simply glowered, clenching her fists at her sides.

“Caleb?” We all stopped talking as a meek blond woman entered the kitchen.

“Mommy?” Caleb gasped. He shot out of his seat, his waffles all but forgotten. We collectively turned to watch Caleb throw himself into his mother’s arms. Tears streamed down both of their cheeks as she bent down to pick up her child. She crushed him against her, and he sobbed while she held him.

“I’m sorry I ran away, Mommy,” he whispered, and she shook her head, her own face streaked with tears.

“That’s okay, baby. We’re safe now. That’s all that matters.”

“We don’t need to go back?”

“No, baby. We don’t need to go back...”

Turning away from the touching reunion in an attempt to give them some privacy, I wracked up the courage to address Cal’s sister again.

“Uhm. Where are they going to go? Considering...” I stopped speaking mid-sentence, suddenly unsure if Cass knew Cal had killed Caleb’s dad.

Theo shot me a dark look. “Considering what?”

Cass rolled her eyes. “That’s privileged information, Ms...” she trailed off, and Theo snorted.

“Theo... her name is Theo.” I sighed, pinching the bridge of my nose.

“What are you, a lawyer?” Theo asked incredulously.

She grinned. “What gave me away?”

“Besides the fact that you’re clearly a massive bi-”

Cassandra stepped into Theo’s personal space, her brown eyes burning with a terrifying sort of coldness. I had seen that look in Cal’s eyes before, and I didn’t like it.

“Finish that sentence. I dare you,” she challenged, her voice low and dark.

It felt like the temperature in the kitchen dropped several degrees as Cass and my sister stared each other down.

“You think I’m afraid of you? You may have a big fancy law degree, but you wouldn’t last a *second* in my world, princess,” Theo growled, stepping even closer into her personal space.

The corner of Cass’ mouth tilted up, and her gaze fell to the cut on Theo’s cheek.

“What, because you live some shitty life that fucks up your face, you think you’re tougher than me?”

To my absolute shock and horror, Cassandra reached out with the hand that wasn’t holding her Chanel bag and literally stuck her nail in the cut on Theo’s face.

She jerked back and away from her, a potent mix of fury and astonishment flashing across her face.

Holy shit, this woman was insane. I glanced between Cass and Cal, realizing that they had more in common than just physical appearance. They were both fucking psychopaths.

Cass smirked at my sister as she sputtered in fury before her, clearly unable to form a coherent sentence.

“I’ve survived much worse than whoever gave you that cut, *Theo*.” Cass sneered. “The difference, though, is the person who hurt me isn’t fucking alive to talk about it. Can you say the same?”

The kitchen was now silent, and Cass’ eyes flashed in triumph.

“Didn’t think so.” She turned away from Theo, dismissing her with a flick of her long dark hair, settling her hard brown eyes on Caleb and his mother.

“Alright, you two. In the car. I’ll drop you off at a shelter on my way to court,” she barked before stalking out of my kitchen.

We all stared for a moment as the hurricane, who was Cassandra, exited the building, taking Caleb and his mother with her.

“Uhh...” I glanced at Cal, completely flabbergasted. “What just happened?” I asked him, and he chuckled.

“My sister, ladies and gentlemen.”

Theo let out a strange sputtering noise and turned on her heel, her face red with fury.

“I’m going to go disinfect this after that psycho put her fucking fingers all over it.”

Cal just snickered harder. “Come on, muscles. You liked it. Don’t tell me that didn’t get you a little wet!”

Theo didn't look back; she just flipped Cal off and slammed the back door on her way out.

My mother began cleaning up Caleb's forgotten waffles with a serene smile on her face.

"Looks like Ryan isn't the only one with a dark angel." She hummed, and Cal gave me a quizzical look. I just rolled my eyes and gestured to the mess in the kitchen.

"Help my mom clean this up. I have to get ready for Ms. Thompson's service," I snapped at him. If he was going to invite himself into my home and make a mess, the least he could do was help with the washing after.

Cal grabbed my arm as I turned to leave, spinning me back to face him. He was uncomfortably close, and suddenly, my heart was in my throat.

He massaged my bicep gently, and his hot hand reminded me of when he had been massaging a much more intimate part of me the day before. I swallowed thickly, and his grin widened as if he could see exactly where my mind had gone.

"Anything I can do to help, ginger snap?" he asked softly, leaning in even closer.

"Yeah, I just told you what you could do to help."

"I meant with the service."

My eyebrows shot into my hairline, and my mouth parted in surprise. I had not been expecting that at all. Getting anyone to help me with funerals around here was like pulling teeth. I usually hired people as needed. Today, I had a man coming in to help with the wake in an hour or two.

More gently than I meant to, I shrugged out of Cal's grip, doing my best to cling to the sane part of me that knew better than to let a fucking murderer get this close to me.

"Don't you have better things to do with your time than help some random person set up a funeral service for someone you don't even know?" I asked.

Cal cocked his head to the side, his dark eyebrows furrowing.

"Of course I do, Ryan. But I can always make time for you."

A strange, warm feeling swirled in my gut at his words. No one had ever said anything like that to me before. Not even my own mother. Don't get me wrong, I knew my mother loved me, but she always seemed to have one foot in another dimension. I never felt like I had her undivided attention.

With my dad, I had always come second to the business. He wouldn't have said that was the case if I asked him, but actions spoke louder than words.

Then Theo... Well, Theo had her own demons.

I cleared my throat awkwardly and took another step away from Cal, trying to ignore the rush of disappointment that flooded through me when he let me go.

"Help my mom clean up. I have to go figure out how I'm going to cover up this black eye before guests start arriving. I expect you to be gone by the time I come back downstairs."

Cal's gaze burned into mine, and he pursed his lips at my dismissal. Again, I waited for him to fight me on it. To crowd me. To announce that he was going to help me cover up the bruise he had given me, whether I liked it or not.

Instead, he nodded, and I couldn't help but notice that he looked a little hurt by my words.

Ignoring the pang of guilt in my chest, I left Cal with my mother and made my way upstairs.

Caleb was gone, and so was any reason for us to continue to see each other. I had done the right thing by telling him to go...

Then why did it feel so wrong?

28



Cal Walker

I helped Iris clean up the kitchen, feeling more than a little put out that Ryan hadn't accepted my offer to help him with the service.

He was right. I did have other shit that I should be doing. Ryker's orders were burning fresh in my inbox, and I really should be spending the day trying to hunt down that man who had been causing all the problems.

However, I didn't want to. I wanted to spend time with Ryan. I didn't mind helping him with his job if it meant we got to be together.

Apparently, the feeling wasn't mutual. Naomi had told me to back off and listen to him if he told me he needed space, and I knew she was right, but... it was hard.

Drying off the last of the dishes, I sighed, and Iris patted my arm gently. I turned to look at her, and she gave me a knowing smile.

"There, there, dear. He'll come around. Ryan always takes some convincing to walk the path less traveled despite the fact that he is... rather *extraordinary*. He's stubborn. Just like his father."

“My sister said I shouldn’t force myself on him,” I complained, untying the totally boss apron that Iris let me borrow.

Iris chuckled. “While I agree that force is likely not the way to my son’s heart, *persistence* will be necessary, dearie. Don’t give up. We have been waiting for you for a long time. He will just need some convincing.”

I cocked my head to the side, confused. That wasn’t the first time she had said something like that. I ran my hand over the small lump in my pocket that housed the weird little pouch she had given me when I first met her.

“What do you mean by that?” I asked, but she just gave me a strange smile and floated toward the door.

“My son loves lilies. The flower. If you ever find yourself in a position where you need his forgiveness, consider a nice bouquet.”

And then, she was gone.



RYAN HAD SAID I NEEDED TO BE OUT OF THE HOUSE BEFORE HE CAME BACK downstairs. He didn’t say anything about being *away* from the house.

Parking my G-Wagon down the street, I texted Vox, asking him to come help me wire up some monitors in the vehicle.

If I couldn’t help Ryan with the service, then I might as well get some recon done, but I still wanted to be able to keep an eye on my ginger snap while we worked.

Vox arrived and got to work installing some baby monitors that he repurposed for my creepy stalking purposes. I could switch them to rearview and GPS monitors if and when I ever got Ryan’s sexy ass in my car. Until he admitted that we were together, I didn’t want him to know about the live feeds I had installed in his house. I had a feeling he would be mad about it and make me take them down.

In my defense, I had installed them for more serious reasons than watching him jerk it in the shower, though that was obviously a huge bonus. Ryker’s not-so-subtle threat made me nervous, and I wanted to be able to have eyes on him at all times. That way, if anything went down, I could show up to save his ginger ass.

While Vox installed my monitors, I climbed into the front seat with my laptop. I yelped in surprise as something sharp dug into my thigh. Vox cocked an eyebrow at me in question, and I fished the weird pouch Iris had given me out of my pocket. The nail in it had stabbed me in the leg, and I frowned.

Fuck.

Hopefully, I wouldn't need a damn tetanus shot after this...

I stuffed the pouch in my cup holder before settling into the driver's seat and firing up my computer.

Ryan's street slowly filled with cars as people arrived for the funeral, and I watched all the people dressed in black formal attire show up with grim expressions on their faces.

Everyone was so somber but... put together? It felt very clinical. I tried to imagine how I would feel if I showed up at Cass or Naomi's funeral and shuddered.

I wouldn't be feeling *somber*, that's for fucking sure. I would be losing my fucking *mind*. How all these people who were coming to grieve a loved one seemed so put together and calm was beyond me.

I supposed everyone was different.

As people filed into Ryan's house, I got to work digging into the encrypted digital package Damian had sent me.

From what I could gather, we were looking for Ronan Carter. He was a man on a fucking mission. It was clear he was a professional, and based on how easily he had been covering his tracks, it was obvious he was ex-police, at the very least.

The other man, Logan Sutton, didn't seem to have any police background at all, but he was smart and...*creative* with his kills. Logan also seemed to be nearly as good with black hat hacking as Vox was, which was going to make my job difficult. It was extremely tough to track hackers. They rarely left a paper trail.

I stared down at Logan's headshot. Vox had pulled it from the *About* page on his tattoo shop's website. He was giving California surfer with a side of serial killer. His dark blond hair curled out of a backwards ball cap and his pretty eyes were blank and void of light. He was hot as fuck. Like a ten out of ten, and also... vaguely familiar. It took me a minute, but I realized after a moment that I'd seen him before.

I'd been sent by Damian to guard some judge who lived in a big fancy house; however, by the time I got there, the dude was already dead. I saw Logan leaving the scene but hadn't known at the time that he'd been the killer, so I let him go.

Huh.

This whole thing *screamed* 'revenge mission.' They had started with small potatoes, targeting pedophiles.

My gut churned as I realized they were hunting the same types of douchebags I did in my spare time. That fact alone made me hate the fact that I had been assigned to this mission. I didn't want to kill these guys. I wanted to *help* them. However, it became clear why Damian wanted them gone as I scrolled deeper into their file.

What I couldn't figure out was how they were sourcing their targets. If I could work that out, I could likely determine who their next target was going to be, then intercept them and take them out before they could execute.

Vox finished up with my monitors, and I glanced up with a grin, flipping to the viewing room so I could watch my man in action.

He was in a suit, looking absolutely fucking *delicious* in formal attire. However, the tie he was wearing would look way hotter around his wrists than his neck, in my opinion...

I watched as he mingled with the attendees. It was an open casket, and I frowned as I saw a strange shadow following him around the room as he checked in with guests.

His back was stiff, and he seemed more uptight than usual, and he kept brushing off the strange shadow that no one else seemed able to see.

"What do you think that is?" I asked Vox, pointing to the dark spot on the monitor. He frowned and fiddled with the wiring in an attempt to correct the screen.

"I don't know, man. I don't think it's the hardware. It's almost like he's interacting with it or something..." I said when none of Vox's tinkering made a difference.

Vox leaned back, his brow creased as we watched the odd phenomenon. The more I watched, the more frantic Ryan seemed to become.

He was rushing (in his controlled Ryan way) to do what I would have assumed were several people's jobs. He was greeting guests, showing them the way through the house while also doing his best to mingle in the

viewing room. At one point, he hurried out to the garage to get the hearse ready, and I tongued my lip ring anxiously.

Didn't he have anyone to help him? Why was he doing all this by himself? Where was Theo?

Ryan told me he didn't want my help... but it was starting to get hard to watch. The final straw was when a woman grabbed him by the arm, and his entire body locked up with anxiety.

The strange shadow next to him seemed to flicker violently while this woman was clearly *berating* him... What was this lady's fucking problem?

I told myself it was nothing. Ryan could handle it. He did this every day... he didn't need my help.

However, I lost it when the lady pointed a finger in his face, and it became clear that she was straight-up yelling at him.

I would fucking kill her.

"I'm going in." I snarled, and Vox gave me an amused look, shaking his head.

"What!?" I asked, and he just shrugged, the corner of his mouth quirking up.

"Whatever. Stay here. I'll be back in a bit," I ordered, hopping out of the wagon. I would just make sure he was ok and tell whoever that bitch was to back the fuck off... politely, of course.

Yeah. I would *politely* let her know that there was room for two in that pretty coffin if she touched my man again.

29



Ryan Fairview

Everything had gone to fucking shit.

I was already feeling self-conscious because the makeup I had borrowed from my mom to cover up my shiner seemed to have just made it look worse. I had no idea how to put makeup on a living person, and I was completely shit at it. So, with a still kind of purple but now cakey eye, I put on my suit and made my way downstairs to get started.

I received a text from Luthor, my part-time funeral service attendant, informing me that he had woken up with a bug and couldn't make it.

This meant I would be totally alone, which was not ideal. Luthor usually helped me with transportation and greeting guests while I ensured the ceremony itself ran smoothly.

This would have been manageable if it weren't for Ms. Thompson having an absolute fucking *fit* the whole time because her sister had been invited.

She followed me around as I rushed to greet people and get the hearse ready, constantly chewing me out for not insisting that her sister be barred

from the premises.

I did my best to hiss at her under my breath that there was literally nothing I could do about it. Her benefactors were in charge of ensuring her wishes were carried out. I was merely the person who executed those wishes. However, I was the only person who could see or hear her, so I was forced to listen to her complain the entire fucking time.

Finally, when her sister arrived, I quickly learned why Ms. Thompson hated her so much.

God, that woman was awful.

The moment she barrelled into the viewing room, looking around the space for someone to scream at, I caved and fired a text off to Theo.

RYAN:

I hate to ask, but Luthor called in sick, and things are getting out of control. Can you please suit up and lend me a hand? Just handle transport; I'll do the rest.

THEO:

My face is all fucked up; isn't that going to look bad if we both look like we came out of a brawl?

RYAN:

I don't really have a choice here. Ms. Thompson's sister just showed up, and I think things are about to hit the fan.

THEO:

Alright. Fine. Give me 15. I need to find my suit.

RYAN:

It's in the mud room; Mom got it dry-cleaned for you last week.

THEO:

Thumbs up emoji.

Say what you would about Theo, but she was pretty good when she knew you needed her. She hated helping out with stuff like this, but she also knew I would never ask unless it was super urgent.

Feeling slightly better, knowing that help was on the way, I turned to face Ms. Thompson's sister just as she barrelled into me.

"Excuse me! Are *you* the funeral director for this absolute *shit show* of a service!?" she screeched at me.

"Ma'am, let's take this conversation into the hall, shall we? This is not the place," I replied in my most calm and soothing voice. The entire family

was staring at us now, and Ms. Thompson's sister grabbed my arm and shoved her finger in my face angrily.

'Here we go...' Ms. Thompson's ghost sighed in my ear. *'I told you not to let her on the property...'*

"Don't you tell me where the right place is to have this discussion! This is my sister's funeral, and you're *fucking it up!*"

"Ma'am, please just—"

Suddenly, all the hairs on the back of my neck stood up, and the angry woman was thrown away from me. I blinked at the six-foot-four, black-haired punk that was now standing between me and Ms. Thompson's sister.

If his height didn't already make him stick out like a sore thumb, Cal's insanely inappropriate attire certainly did. His usual black hoodie, shredded black jeans, and scuffed combat boots were so out of place in the sea of guests that my entire body shuddered with the wrongness of it all.

To make matters worse, Ms. Thomson's ghost *screamed* in my ear, and she fled the room just as Cal's horde of ghouls spilled into the viewing room.

'Devil boy!' the ghost of Cal's mother screeched as she barrelled toward me, passing directly through my chest before I could move out of the way.

The resulting effect was equivalent to diving head-first into an ice-covered lake. The breath was torn from my lungs, and I literally groaned out loud in pain.

The room was suddenly swimming as several more ghouls clawed at me.

I felt like I was drowning.

I could barely hear Cal shouting at the lady who had accosted me.

"Touch him again, and all these people will be back for *your* funeral, sweets." He was growling, and I gasped, reaching for him, trying to get him to *shut the fuck up*.

"Cal. Stop," I rasped. But he either didn't hear me or didn't care. His mother passed through me again, screeching and clawing at my insides.

Everyone was staring.

They were whispering and judging. This was wrong, so, so wrong.

This was so inappropriate. No one was ever going to want to have a service here again... My father's legacy would be destroyed because I had let this fucking pushy *mercenary* into my life...

“GET THE FUCK OUT!” I was suddenly screaming, shoving Cal toward the door.

He turned to look at me, clearly shocked and confused that I was yelling at him.

“Ryan... I just—”

“GET OUT! YOU’RE FUCKING RUINING EVERYTHING!” I was still screaming. All the stress from the day finally exploded out of me. The additional discomfort of the constant onslaught of ghouls passing through me was making it impossible for me to keep a level head. I just wanted him gone. I couldn’t breathe.

My whole body had broken out into a cold sweat, and I was so dizzy.

Cal looked like I had just broken his heart. He hovered for a moment as if he were waiting for me to take it back, but I couldn’t.

“Please. Just fucking get out of here. You’re ruining everything!” I begged, and finally, he nodded once and pushed through the crowd, leaving the viewing room.

His ghouls followed him, but the damage had been done. I was literally shaking when I felt strong hands curl around my shoulders.

I jerked away, thinking it was Cal, but looked up to see it was my sister. Her lips were crushed into a firm, concerned line.

“Head upstairs. I’ll take over for today,” she said, her tone more gentle than normal.

Nodding, I stumbled away, humiliation and shame at my behavior suddenly taking over.

The hurt look on Cal’s face swam across my vision as I dragged myself upstairs and into a hot shower, doing my best to get my core body temperature back up.

I battled with my guilt as I stood beneath the steaming spray.

Why did I feel guilty? He shouldn’t have been there! He was constantly barging into my life. He didn’t belong here.

My life was serious and orderly... there was no room for the chaos that was Cal fucking Walker.

So why did I feel like I had just made a horrible mistake and hurt someone who might actually really care about me?

I shook my head.

No. I couldn’t think like that. Nothing was more important than the business. Cal was a threat to everything I had worked toward. I couldn’t let

him fuck it up just because he had looked at me with those sad brown eyes...

I smacked my forehead into the shower wall with a groan.

What a fucking mess.

OceanofPDF.com

30



Ryan Fairview

After using up all the hot water, I laid down until the sun began to set. By the time the sky began to bleed orange and pink, I was physically feeling better but still so fucking gutted over the way I had yelled at Cal.

Putting on a pair of grey sweatpants and a white cotton T-shirt, I padded down into the kitchen with a growling stomach.

I hadn't eaten anything all day and was starting to feel a little nauseous because of it. To my surprise, I found Theo sitting in the kitchen. She was still in her pantsuit with her shirt unbuttoned to reveal her sports bra, sipping a beer.

As I entered, she shifted her dark eyes to mine and raised an eyebrow.

"You're up," she said. It was an observation, not a question.

I nodded. "Yeah."

"Sit down," she ordered, and I frowned at her, wondering what this was all about. Theo rarely wanted to spend time with me. Curiosity, more than anything, drove me to obey.

I pulled out a chair and sat at the table. She got up and pulled out a bottle of expensive tequila we save for special occasions and two crystal rocks glasses.

She put a glass in front of me, then sat down and poured us each a finger.

“It’s a weekday, Theo,” I pointed out.

She shrugged. “Drink the fucking drink, Ryan. I need to talk to you, and neither of us is good at this shit.”

Fair enough.

I knocked back the tequila, and she immediately poured me another ounce.

“How did the service go?” I asked, watching her shoot her liquor and pour herself another.

“It went fine.”

“Was everyone upset?”

“No. Most of the family said that was a pretty typical event where Ms. Sherri Thomspen was concerned. Apparently, this was mild for them. Several people asked me to express their apologies to you and let you know they thought the service was lovely, and they were sorry she clearly upset you.”

I glanced up at her, shocked.

They had wanted to apologize to... Me?

“That doesn’t make any sense. I behaved *completely* inappropriately, and Cal... he came in and totally made a mess of things!”

Theo eyed me, her lips a firm line. She spun her glass on the table before taking another large sip.

“I saw him come in. It looked like he was trying to get that psycho lady off you. Honestly, I was about to do the same thing, but he beat me to it. She had no right putting her hands on you like that, Ryan.”

I stared at Theo, surprised that she was coming to Cal’s defense.

“Don’t get me wrong. The dude’s a total fucking weirdo, and I think it’s strange that he seems to have just inserted himself into our lives, but... I’m never going to be against someone who clearly has your back like that.”

My mouth opened and closed several times in shock, but Theo just poured me another drink.

“Down that. I have to ask you something else, and it’s going to be awkward.”

My empty stomach was burning with the few ounces I had already consumed, but something about the way Theo was looking at me made me want to comply.

I tipped back my drink and swallowed the alcohol, feeling the heady effects start to hit my bloodstream. I had to admit, I was feeling much more relaxed.

“Okay. What do you want to ask?”

Theo looked me dead in the eye and, with a completely straight face, hit me with the last thing I ever expected to come out of her mouth.

“Are you gay?”

“What!?” I sputtered, standing up so quickly that my chair shot backward. Theo rolled her eyes.

“Sit down. Relax. It’s fine if you are, Ryan. No one fucking cares.”

“Then why are you asking?!”

Theo sighed, swirling her tequila around in her cup. “I’m asking because I see the way you’ve been eye fucking Cal since we met him. He looks at you the same way, and... like I said, I think the guy’s a fucking weirdo, but you’re... different around him. More alive. Better than I’ve ever seen you.” She glanced up at me, her dark eyes burning into mine. “Way fucking better than you are with that Joanna chick.”

Slowly, I slumped back down in my chair and shoved my empty glass toward Theo. She chuckled and topped me up. I took another deep pull and groaned, leaning back into my seat.

“Fucking Joanna.”

“Dude. She’s so fucking *boring*. But she’s still a person with feelings. If you’re crushing on this Cal guy, you need to break up with her. You honestly should have broken up with her a long time ago.”

“Even if I was ‘*crushing*’ on him,” I made sarcastic air quotes to punctuate the word *crushing*. “He’s probably never going to speak to me again. Not after today,” I grumbled, the booze making me more open about everything Cal made me feel. My cheeks flushed as I remembered jerking off in the shower to the thought of him touching me.

I had even experimented with fingering my asshole a little... Did that make me gay?

“How can I be twenty fucking seven and just be questioning my sexuality now?” I wondered out loud, taking another sip of tequila.

Theo chuckled. "I dunno, man. I've kinda thought you were gay for years. You've never really been interested in girls. In your defense, you haven't really shown an interest in dudes either until now, but anyone with eyes can see you're into that guy."

"What are people going to think?" I whispered.

Theo scoffed. "I'm gay. Does that change the way you think about me?"

I frowned. "Of course not."

Theo had been out as a lesbian for as long as I could remember. It was just a fact. The sun was hot, the sky was blue, Theo was gay. It was different for me. I had always identified as straight. If it turned out I wasn't, would it be a big shock to everyone? Would I have to do a whole 'coming out' thing? I *hated* being the center of attention. Fielding questions from acquaintances, peers, and extended family about my sexuality was the definition of my living nightmare.

Theo shrugged. "Fuck people. Who cares what they think? And honestly, being gay isn't this big taboo thing like it used to be. Just lean into it. Experiment. See if you like it. You don't need to be so fucking serious and black and white about everything, Ryan. Don't label it if you don't want to... Just don't hold yourself back either."

I sighed. The truth was, with Cal, the gay thing was only part of it. Theo had no idea he had murdered Caleb's father, and I had incinerated his corpse in our cremator.

"He's dangerous, though," I whispered.

Theo smirked. "So what? So am I."

I rolled my eyes but couldn't help but grin stupidly at her. My eyes felt warm. I was definitely kind of drunk.

"Whatever. Cal's sister practically kicked your ass today," I teased, and her eyes darkened.

"Yeah. I'll have to return the favor," she muttered, and I laughed, shaking my head.

"You don't beat up civilians. Not since high school, at least."

The corner of her mouth twitched. "I don't need to beat her up to put her in her fucking place."

It was my turn to roll my eyes. "You always talk such a big game, Theodora. We all know you're a big teddy bear deep down." I slurred, and she took another sip of tequila, her eyes flashing.

“Only for the people who deserve it. Anyway, we’re not talking about me. We’re talking about you and your big gay crush on the psychopath that keeps breaking into our house.”

I flipped her off, but I couldn’t keep the goofy grin off my face.

Theo wasn’t smiling. “You owe him an apology, Ryan. You were fucking cold today. Even I could see that the dude was just trying to help you.”

I nodded. “Yeah. I felt bad after.”

“You should feel bad. That wasn’t fucking cool.”

I sighed. “Alright. I’ll apologize. But that doesn’t mean it’s ‘cause I want to date him! It’s just the polite thing to do!” Even I could tell I was slurring, and Theo rolled her eyes again, snatching the tequila out of my hand as she stood up.

“Whatever, man. Just... make sure you break up with Joanna while you figure your shit out. Though I doubt she’s really going to care. I think she’s as gay as you are,” she muttered, and I scowled at her back as she deposited our cups in the sink.

“I never agreed that I was gay!” I yelled after her, but she just waved me off and slipped out the back door on her way to the guest house.

I’m not gay... am I?

Remembering how good Cal’s hand had felt around my cock and how quickly he had been able to get me to come, I shuddered.

Okay. Maybe I was a little gay...

Hoping Cal might have sent me a text, I slipped my phone out of my pocket and checked my messages ... but... there was nothing.

My fingers hovered over the keys, and I contemplated messaging him for a moment, then I pussied out.

“Ugh... why is this so confusing?” I grumbled, running a hand through my hair. Instead of texting Cal, I opened my text thread with Joanna. The last interaction I had with her had been nearly two weeks ago, and it was completely clinical.

We set up dates like we were setting up business meetings. I thought about what Theo had said and wondered if there was any truth to it. Were Joanna and I just two closeted people who had been clinging to each other because we thought a hetero couple was what the world wanted to see?

‘It’s okay if you are, Ryan. No one fucking cares.’

Was Theo right? Would no one really care if I dated a man? Would it make a difference for the business if people thought the funeral director was gay? Our industry was very traditional... I had always assumed that was why Theo hadn't wanted any part of the family business.

I couldn't be sure.

What I could be sure of was that Theo was definitely right about Joanna. If I was even having these thoughts at all, it didn't feel fair to her that I led her on.

Before my alcohol-addled brain could talk me out of it, I fired off a text.

RYAN:

Hey Joanna. I hate to do this over text, but... I don't think this is working. I think we should end things. You're great. It's not you at all. I'm going through some stuff. If you want to talk more about it, let's get coffee tomorrow.

She read it almost immediately, and I watched as the dots appeared, indicating she was writing back. God, I was such an asshole. *Who breaks up with someone over text?*

JOANNA:

Hi Ryan. Nice to hear from you. Sorry to hear you're going through some things. I would love to have coffee tomorrow to chat. No hard feelings. Let me know if there's anything I can do to help you through this difficult time.

My eye twitched. This couldn't be normal, could it? We basically just broke up with the same level of emotion you would put into a corporate email chain.

Jesus fucking Christ...

It had never bothered me before, but now I was suddenly imagining how Cal would react if I had ever sent him a text like that.

He would probably break into my fucking bedroom and tie me to the bed until I changed my mind... My cock twitched in my pants at the thought, only to immediately deflate when I realized that might no longer be the case... not after the way I had treated him.

I got up from the table and wandered out into the backyard. It was a beautiful night. The moon was up, and the silvery light was enough to illuminate our back porch, casting nighttime shadows across Iris' garden.

The fresh air helped clear my tequila brain enough for me to seriously consider texting Cal again.

I opened our conversation and stared at it.

I was such a *dick* to him all the time... guilt churned in my gut. Re-reading our messages from this morning with fresh eyes, it was hard not to feel like an absolute douchebag. He was always so chipper and fun. I was this miserable asshole who just kept trying to push him away...

"Fuck." I growled out loud. Even now, I couldn't even send him a simple text saying '*I'm sorry.*' Why? Was it because I was afraid of how he made me feel?

"Uhm. Hey."

I nearly jumped out of my skin, and my phone went flying. I glanced up to find Cal standing on the walkway, holding a giant bouquet of lilies.

Omg. He was here! He came back? He brought me... flowers?

My stomach was doing some weird shit it had never done before. I couldn't find the words to speak. All I could do was stare at him.

"I know you probably don't want me to be here... I just came to drop these off and say sorry." He cast his eyes down and laid the flowers on the steps at my feet.

"Night, ginger snap," he said before turning to leave.

"Wait!" I called after him, and he froze, turning back to face me, looking shocked and painfully hopeful.

My eyes darted around, looking for the ghouls. Finding none, I let out a deep breath and forced myself to meet his gaze.

"Don't go," I said.

We stared at each other for a long moment, and I held my breath, suddenly nervous that he would turn me down.

Then... he smiled.

31



Ryan Fairview

Alexa, play: Swim - Chase Atlantic

“How did you know I love lilies?” I asked dumbly. My heart was suddenly pounding in my chest, and my hands were shaking.

Cal was eyeing me up and down, somewhat more cautiously than he ever had before.

“Your mom,” he explained, still staring at me. I swallowed.

“Oh, yeah. That makes sense...”

He nodded, shoving his hands in his pockets. We stood in silence for an excruciating long, awkward minute.

I cleared my throat, ready to apologize, when he took a tentative step forward, stepping right over the lilies he had left on the step.

“Ryan, I’m sorry. I know you told me to leave today, and you said you didn’t want my help. I shouldn’t have barreled in like that without an

invitation, especially while you were working. I'm just having a really hard time staying away from you."

I ran a hand through my hair, shaking my head, the booze in my veins making me bolder than I ever would be normally.

"No, Cal. I owe you an apology. I shouldn't have yelled at you like that. You were just trying to help. I was having a terrible day, and I was super over-stimulated. I don't know if you weren't wearing your talisman, but—" I cut myself off, realizing my drunk ass almost told him I see dead people.

Fuck. He would think I was more crazy than he is!

Cal cocked his head to the side and took another step closer to me. Instinctively, I took a step back and immediately regretted it. I didn't want to push him away... not right now. Thankfully, he didn't seem to notice.

"How did you know that I didn't have the talisman on me?" he asked softly.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," I whispered, and he took another step forward. I stepped back again and found that I had nowhere else to go. My back was flush against the wall, and he was so close. My whole body was humming with an electric sort of warmth, and I didn't think it was the alcohol.

He was staring at me so intently, and for once, there wasn't a single trace of humor on his face. My gaze traced his jawline. He had a bit of dark stubble growing in, and I had a sudden, visceral image of me running my tongue over it.

It would probably feel so rough, like velcro... Why did I like the thought of that?

"Does it have something to do with the shadows that seem to follow you around?" he asked.

I frowned. "What shadows?"

For a second, he looked like he was going to say something, but then he stopped himself.

"Nevermind," he breathed and reached forward carefully as if waiting for me to jerk away from him. I knew I should probably push him away, but I didn't want to.

I let him cup the side of my neck, and I shivered as he brushed his thumb firmly over my jaw, right where I had imagined myself licking him.

"You're so fucking gorgeous, Ryan," he rumbled. "I'm sorry I'm so obsessed with you, but fuck. I can't help it. You're too damn beautiful."

I swallowed and looked up at him.

"It feels weird having a dude call me beautiful," I admitted, though honestly, it would be weird to me if *anyone* told me they thought I was beautiful. I was pale and freckled with bright red hair. I was never anyone's first choice. It was something I had forced myself to make peace with over the years, though it did hurt me to think about sometimes when I looked in the mirror.

Despite the fact that I found it hard to believe Cal truly found me beautiful, I realized that I did think *he* was.

Greedily, I drank him in as he pressed closer, breathing in his intoxicating scent. He leaned in closer, and the tip of his nose brushed against the tip of mine. He hovered there for a moment, giving me room to pull away. He smelled like bergamot and oak. I inhaled, and a rush of excitement coursed through me as his breath danced across my lips.

"You ever been kissed by a man, Ryan?" he asked, and I shook my head slightly, feeling stiff as a board. He pressed up against me, and our chests bumped together. He stroked his thumb over that spot on my jaw again, and I made an involuntary whimper.

"You smell like alcohol," Cal murmured, sliding his other hand up my bare arm to play with the sleeve of my shirt. His gentle fingers left a trail of gooseflesh in its wake.

"Theo got me drunk and told me I have the hots for you," I admitted, closing my eyes and finding myself leaning into his touch.

A low, surprised chuckle escaped Cal's lips. His mouth was so close to mine. I found myself turning my head to the side to line up our mouths.

"Is that so?" Cal asked. He touched his lips to mine so fucking softly I could barely even register that we had touched.

"Mhmm." I breathed, and Cal's hand tightened on the side of my face.

"Do you?"

"What?"

"Have the hots for me?" he asked, holding me firmly in place.

Did I have the hots for him? I wasn't sure. I knew that I wanted him to kiss me. I knew that much.

"I-I don't know," I admitted, and he chuckled again. That deep masculine rumble rolled through his chest and made my dick swell in my sweats.

"Do you want to find out?" he asked, and I found myself nodding.

“Yes.”

“Good. Me too,” he growled, and before I could react, his lips crashed into mine.

His lip ring pressed into me, and he swiped his tongue across the seam of my mouth, begging me to open for him. I did, and suddenly, his hot tongue was stroking against mine.

I moaned in his mouth embarrassingly loud. I couldn’t fucking help it.

Our teeth clashed, and he possessively stroked my tongue before sucking it into his mouth. With each pulse, my dick grew harder.

He held my head in place with his right hand, but his left hand roamed freely. One moment, he was stroking my cheek; the next, his fingers were tugging on my hair hard enough that I groaned, and then, finally, he slid his hand down my chest.

“You taste just like I imagined you would, Ryan.” He groaned into my mouth. I bit down on his bottom lip and sucked on his lip ring, teasing it with my tongue.

His fingers closed around my nipple and pinched it through my T-shirt. I whined and arched, finding my own fingers in his thick, dark hair. I pulled him in closer and shoved my tongue back into his mouth, aggressively lashing against him.

“*Fuck*,” I cursed as his hand slid lower. He went slowly, pausing periodically as if waiting to see if I would stop him. After a few excruciating minutes, I grew impatient and grabbed his hand, shoving it lower.

He broke the kiss and stared at me, his lips swollen and puffy from where I had bitten him. We were both panting and rock hard. I was desperate for him to touch me again.

“You want this,” he said. It wasn’t a question.

“Touch me like you did before,” I rasped. He rested his forehead against mine, his chest heaving from the intensity of our kiss.

“You’re going to regret this tomorrow,” he said, and I hated the sadness I heard in his tone.

“I won’t,” I insisted. I leaned back into the wall and pushed his hand over my sweats so he could feel how hard I was for him. He cupped me firmly, rubbing me over my pants and making me groan with need. “Please, Cal,” I whimpered. How had I not realized how touch-starved I had been? How much I *needed* this?

Why had I pushed him away so much? All the reasons I had before seemed impossible for me to remember. His eyes were searching mine, and I could see the apprehension in them.

“You’re drunk. When you’re sober, you’re going to be upset with me for taking advantage of you,” he said, and I shook my head furiously.

“I won’t. I promise. Please, Cal. I want to...try.”

He stared at me for a moment, then his shoulders slumped in defeat.

“You know I can’t say no when you beg, ginger snap,” he rumbled, kissing me harshly again. This time he sucked my lip into his mouth, and I groaned at the intoxicating mix of pleasure and pain.

Without warning, Cal yanked my pants down to my ankles, and I gasped. He got to his knees in front of me, and I nearly fucking came just from the sight of my cock bobbing in the air so close to his face.

“I’m going to suck you until you come down my throat, Ryan Fairview,” he announced, wrapping his hand around my cock without any hesitation. I watched as he opened his mouth and licked the pre cum right off the tip before closing his lips around the head and sucking.

“Fuuuckkk,” I groaned, throwing my head back against the wall at the shock of his hot mouth wrapped around my dick. “Jesus fucking Christ, Cal. That feels...”

He popped my dick out of his mouth and stroked it a few times, examining it as if he wanted to commit it to memory.

“Such a gorgeous fucking cock. Curved... I didn’t get a good look last time.” With the hand that wasn’t stroking me, he fondled my balls and looked up at me again.

“Pay attention. I’m going to expect you to return the favor later,” he ordered, and I swallowed but nodded.

Fuck... I was going to have to suck his dick too? I guess that was only fair. Fuck me, I had no idea how to suck a dick! What if I was shit at it?

“Eyes on me, Ryan,” he ordered before slurping my entire cock down like it was nothing. My eyes rolled back into my head, and my knees buckled.

“Holy fucking—”

Without meaning to, I curled my fingers in his soft mop of hair and pulled him closer to my hips. I could feel the walls of his tight throat as he swallowed my cock, and I was worried I would explode from that act alone.

A fucking *MAN* was sucking my dick, and it was the most erotic experience I had ever had in my life.

“*Mmmphhh.*” Cal moaned as he slowly bobbed his head. Up and down, up and down, he methodically built a fire that I wasn’t sure I would be able to keep under control for long.

“Callum, *fuck.* If you keep doing that, I’m going to—”

He popped my dick out of his mouth and made eye contact before slapping the head of my cock firmly against his tongue.

“Jesus,” I moaned, and he chuckled, kissing the tip softly.

“You going to come for me, baby?” *Lick.*

“Fuck, Cal... stop teasing me.”

“Your balls are so fucking tight right now.” He pushed my cock up to expose them to him. I quivered in ecstasy as he pulled them gently into his mouth while jerking my now sloppy wet cock with his large, rough hand.

Fireworks were exploding across my mind, and I began to feel like I had tunnel vision. I bit my lip as I stared deep into Cal’s eyes while he sucked on my balls and stroked me until more cum started leaking from my tip. The second he felt it slide down my shaft, he licked up my entire cock again, cleaning it off.

“*Fuuuuck,*” I groaned, and he smirked up at me.

“That’s it, baby. Come down my throat. Let me taste you,” he purred before slurping me back up. He rammed my cock down his throat until he choked. The sound of him gagging on me was too much for me to handle.

My orgasm came out of nowhere.

“Fuck, Cal! I’m coming!” I gasped, though I was a few seconds too late. My cock was already throbbing, and his throat constricted around me as he expertly swallowed my release.

I slumped against the wall and held his head against me until my legs quivered, and I could barely stand anymore.

Once I was finished, he gently untangled my fingers from his hair and popped off me with a grin.

I stared down at him with heavy-lidded eyes, and he licked his lips before sliding up my body and catching my lips in his mouth.

I froze for a moment, unsure how I felt about kissing him after he had just swallowed a mouthful of my cum, but he wasn’t having any of it. He forced his tongue between my lips, and I moaned as his tongue thrashed against mine.

I could taste myself on him, but I found I didn't hate it. It was a very specific flavor, kind of salty but mild. Plus, it was mixed with the peppermint on his breath, which my drunk ass decided was the best thing I had ever tasted in my fucking life.

He nibbled on my bottom lip, and I cupped the side of his face, pulling him in closer and mirroring what he had done for me. I reached down between us and palmed him over his jeans, wanting to make him feel just as good as he had made me feel.

He chuckled against me and snatched up my hand, slamming it against the wall by my head, breaking our kiss again.

"Nuh-uh," he murmured, kissing the tip of my nose. My cheeks flushed red, and I suddenly felt rejected.

"I thought you said I was going to have to return the favor?" I growled. I realized my pants were still around my ankles, and Cal was fully clothed. I didn't like it anymore. I felt exposed and vulnerable.

He grinned at me, kissing me gently on the lips and nipping my jawbone before nuzzling into my neck.

"You will. Just not tonight. I'm not small, Ryan. I don't need you puking whatever it is you drank all over my dick."

I flushed even deeper and pushed him away. "Fine," I snapped, bending down and pulling up my pants.

He chuckled and scooped up the discarded bouquet of lilies and my phone, handing them both to me with an amused look on his face.

I considered turning down the flowers out of spite, my cheeks still burning from the harsh sting of rejection. However, he looked so fucking cute standing there with a bunch of my favorite flowers. My stomach flipped at the thought that he had bought them for me.

No one had ever bought me flowers before... Was it even normal for a man to want someone to buy him flowers?

I snatched them up and moved to storm back inside, but he grabbed my arm and spun me back around to face him.

"Why so grumpy all of a sudden, ginger snap?" Cal asked, his voice a deep, sexy, masculine rumble. I couldn't keep myself from staring at his swollen mouth.

He had literally just had my cock in that mouth seconds ago...

Cal crowded into me the way I was quickly beginning to crave, and I scowled up at him.

“I don’t know. I guess I’m just not feeling super wanted right now. I’ve never been with a guy before, and I put myself out there wanting to... you know, do *that* to you, and you just rejected me. So fuck me, I guess.”

Chuckling, he skimmed a thumb over my chin. He dropped another wet kiss on my mouth, and the paper from the bouquet crinkled between us.

“Of course I want you, ginger snap. I want you so fucking bad that it’s taking everything in me not to hold you down and fuck your virgin ass raw right here,” he growled into my ear, and my eyes widened in shock. My spent dick throbbed again in my sweatpants, and I gaped at him, my heart suddenly in my throat.

“But, you haven’t really liked me up until this point, and you’re drunk. Show me tomorrow that you still want me, and I’ll let you suck my cock as many times as you fucking want.”

I blinked at him, finding it difficult to form words. My cheeks were burning again, but this time for an entirely different reason.

“Sound good, baby?” he murmured, kissing me again softly. When he pulled away, I nodded wordlessly, and he grinned.

“Good. See you in the morning, Ryan. I’ll be here bright and early, making your cranky-ass breakfast.” He winked, and without saying another word, he disappeared into the night.

I was left alone on my porch, clutching my bouquet of lilies, wondering if the last twenty minutes had really happened or if it had all just been a crazy dream.

I glanced down at my newly tented pants and blushed again.

If it was a dream, it was the wettest fucking dream I had ever had in my life.

Goddamn.

32



Ryan Fairview

My head was fucking pounding. I didn't drink very often, so that was my excuse for not remembering to chug water before passing out. My mouth was dryer than the fucking Sahara, and I felt like death.

Groaning, I blinked at the sunlight spilling in through my window, and my eyes caught on a gorgeous bouquet of lilies set up in a vase by the window sill.

The second I saw them, memories from the night before came crashing back. Memories of Cal on his knees, *sucking my dick*.

Oh fuck... what the fuck was wrong with me?!

I groaned again and rolled over, covering my face in shame.

I was such a fucking idiot... Why had I let him do that?

My stomach was churning with anxiety. The more I thought about it, the more the events of the previous night came rushing back.

I hadn't *let* him. I had basically *begged* him to do it... Like a desperate, pathetic *loser*. Even worse! After, I tried to suck him off as well!

My cheeks burned as I remembered that he turned me down, and I wasn't sure if I was grateful or even more humiliated by the fact that he rejected me.

On top of all that... we had done it on the back porch, where anyone could fucking see. Jesus, Theo could have looked out her window in the guest house and would have gotten the show of her life!

I literally fucking hated myself.

My phone buzzed, and I snatched it up, already knowing who it was going to be.

CAL SEX GOD WALKER:

Morning, ginger snap!

CAL SEX GOD WALKER:

How's your head? You hungover or what?

Anxiety twisted in my gut, and for a moment, I didn't know if I should even respond. I was too humiliated.

CAL SEX GOD WALKER:

I left you painkillers and a glass of water on your end table.

CAL SEX GOD WALKER:

Come downstairs! Your mom and I made omelets today. Theo's digging them.

I was about to ask him what he was doing making breakfast again when another message came in.

JOANNA:

HI, RYAN. I'VE HAD A BIT OF A LATE START TODAY,
BUT I SHOULD BE AT YOUR PLACE TO PICK YOU UP
FOR COFFEE SOON. LOOKING FORWARD TO
CATCHING UP.

Groaning again, I threw my head back into my pillow. *Fuck*. I totally forgot I broke up with her via text the day before.

I didn't want to go for fucking coffee with her. I also didn't want to have breakfast with the man who had just sucked my soul out of my cock. All I wanted to do was close all the drapes and wallow in my shame and self-loathing until I passed away.

Real mature Ryan. Stop being such a pussy.

Glancing over at my end table, I saw that Cal hadn't been lying. There was a giant glass of water and two liquid gels waiting for me.

A flutter of gratitude sparked in my chest, and I snatched up the painkillers and downed the water in one go, hoping it would help me wrap my head around what had happened the night before.

Swinging my legs over the edge of my bed, I took a deep breath and forced myself to get up. I was changing into jeans and a Fairview Funerals t-shirt when my phone buzzed again.

CAL SEX GOD WALKER:

Hurry up, Ryan.

CAL SEX GOD WALKER:

Don't make me come up there.

Oh, fuck no. I didn't want him in my bedroom. The kitchen was better. At least there were witnesses, and I would be less likely to make a fucking fool of myself again.

RYAN:

I'm coming.

CAL SEX GOD WALKER:

smirking devil emoji

RYAN:

Not like that, you pervert!

CAL SEX GOD WALKER:

You deff were last night. *winking emoji*

RYAN:

Jesus. It's not even 9 am. Can you at least wait until I've had a coffee before you start making sexual innuendos?

CAL SEX GOD WALKER:

But you make it so easy, baby. <3

CAL SEX GOD WALKER:

Get down here before I'm forced to bring you breakfast in bed.

CAL SEX GOD WALKER:

If that happens, the only thing that's getting eaten is your ass.

RYAN:

JESUS CAL!

CAL SEX GOD WALKER:

hehehehe

Stuffing my phone into my pocket, I jogged down the stairs and slipped into the kitchen. I blinked in surprise to find Theo sitting at the table surrounded by an insane amount of food and Cal bustling about in his 'Obituary' apron.

My mother was already doing dishes, apparently trying to keep up with the whirlwind that was chef Cal.

He beamed at me, and I immediately went tomato red. He took in my flush, and his grin widened further.

"Morning, ginger snap, have a seat. Your omelet is almost ready."

My stomach churned at the idea of putting food in it, and I almost gagged. Theo raised an eyebrow at me as I sat down, and she pushed a coffee toward me.

Eyeing up the stacks of food in front of her, I frowned.

"Hungry today?" I asked, taking in the box of donuts, two omelets, and a small plate of bacon and breakfast sausage next to her.

"Not really. Your boyfriend just shoved all this stuff in front of me and told me I wasn't so bad for '*an angry bodybuilder*.'"

Realization dawned on me. Cal had gotten her donuts and made her breakfast as a thank you for forcing me to realize that I was sort of into him.

"He's not my boyfriend," I grumbled, quietly enough that Cal couldn't hear.

Theo rolled her eyes and took a sip of her coffee. "Just a fuck buddy then?" she asked, keeping her tone equally as quiet while we watched Cal flip my omelet in a pan.

"Neither."

Theo slurped another sip of coffee, her mouth twitching in amusement.

"If he's neither, why'd you let him suck your dick on the back porch last night?"

My mouth dropped open, and I felt like my eyes were going to pop right out of my skull.

"You saw that!?" I hissed, and Theo chuckled behind her mug, her dark eyes glittering with mischief.

"I didn't catch the whole show. Once I realized what was happening, I shut the drapes. Next time, maybe get a room, yeah? I'm happy you're finally getting laid and all, but I don't really need to fucking see it."

I groaned and slammed my head into the table, making the cutlery jump.

Just then, the doorbell rang, and I clapped my hands over my ears, wincing at the loud noise.

"I'll get it!" Iris chimed, sweeping out of the room. Cal dropped my omelet on the table and frowned down at me with concern.

"Did you take the pills I left you?" he asked, gently playing with my hair as I squished my face onto the table.

My skin erupted into gooseflesh as he gently scraped his blunt fingernails against my scalp.

That felt nice.

I sighed and sat up, nodding. I avoided his gaze, still feeling too embarrassed and vulnerable to look at him.

"Yeah," I croaked, pinching my nose. "Thanks."

Cal hovered for another moment, and I could feel his gaze burning into the side of my face, but I still couldn't bring myself to look directly at him. Finally, he slid away, giving me space. I watched him lean against the counter out of the corner of my eye. He took a sip of tea while he continued to stare at me with furrowed brows.

The door to the kitchen swung open, and Iris billowed back in, followed by *fucking* Joanna. I almost slammed my face into the table again.

This was going to be a disaster.

"Who's the nun?" Cal asked, eyeing Joanna up and down. Theo choked on a laugh, and I scowled at her.

Joanna wasn't a *nun*. She was just... modest. She was a Sunday school teacher for our local Catholic church. Today, she was wearing an ankle-length grey skirt and a white blouse that was tied around her neck and wrists with a simple black ribbon. Her blond hair was in a neat braid that flowed over one shoulder.

She smiled at Cal politely.

"Hi. I'm Joanna."

Theo shot me an annoyed look, and I knew what she was going to do before the thought even popped into her head. She turned to Cal, an evil smile curling across her lips.

"Joanna is Ryan's *girlfriend*," she said, and Cal immediately spit a mouthful of tea all over the kitchen table.

"His fucking *what*!?"

My heart was suddenly pounding in my chest. I had never wanted to punch my sister in the face so fucking badly.

“Fuck you, Theo!” I roared, jumping up from my seat. “Mind your fucking business!”

Theo gave me a bored look and stood up too, grabbing her coffee and heading for the back door.

“It would be easier to mind my business if you didn’t make it so fucking public, dude,” she drawled, then slipped out of the kitchen, leaving me with a confused Joanna, a fuming Cal, and a humming Iris, who was idly wiping up the tea Cal had spit all over the place.

OceanofPDF.com

33



Cal Walker

I was so angry... and I *never* got angry.

I fucking *knew* this was going to happen... Okay, I didn't know Ryan was dating a fucking *nun*, but I knew he was going to backtrack the second he woke up sober.

When he responded to my texts that morning, I was hopeful for a minute that he really meant what he had said the night before. That he wasn't going to regret being with me.

For a few shining moments, I really believed he might have wanted to actually give us a try. But then, when he came down to the kitchen, he couldn't even fucking look at me.

He was ashamed.

I knew he was. He was ashamed of being with me, and it fucking *stung*.

My plan had been to hang around until Iris and Theo cleared out so I could talk to him about everything. But then some chick who looked like she belonged on the set of '*Children of the Corn*' waltzed into the kitchen like she owned the place.

“Joanna is Ryan’s girlfriend,” Theo had informed me before making a swift exit. I hadn’t expected grumpy muscle gal to be my number one cheerleader, but that chick seemed to be full of surprises.

“What the fuck do you mean she’s your *girlfriend*?” I snarled at Ryan, putting my mug down on the counter so I didn’t make more of a mess. Iris already had her hands full with the mouthful of tea I’d accidentally spewed across the room.

To make matters worse, Ryan ignored me in favor of Sister Celibacy.

How had I missed this? How did my man have a whole ass GIRLFRIEND I hadn’t known about?

“Go wait outside, Joanna. I’ll be with you in a moment,” Ryan said, pressing his fingers into the corners of his eyes as if he were in physical pain.

‘I’ll be with you in a moment?’ Who the fuck talked to their girlfriend like that?

“Come along, dear. Have you seen the new rose bushes I planted?” Iris hummed, tugging the very confused nun out of the kitchen.

As soon as they were gone, I rounded on Ryan.

“Explain yourself,” I snarled, unable to keep the burning rage that was coursing through my veins under control. Because I didn’t have a lot of experience with anger, I wasn’t very good at controlling it.

Ryan still couldn’t look at me; he was staring at the ground, and his cheeks were all red. Normally, I thought it was adorable. Right now, it just made me more angry.

“There’s nothing to explain. I was dating her, and last night, when I was drunk, I sent her a text saying we should end things.”

This caused me to pause. I narrowed my eyes.

“So you’re breaking up with her?”

“I-I don’t know. We’re going for coffee, and we’re going to talk about it.”

Anger pulsed through me at his wishy-washy fucking answer.

Suddenly, I was crowding him. I wrapped my hand around his throat and forced him back into the wall. He didn’t even try to fight me, which pissed me off even more for some reason. He just stared directly at my chest, still refusing to meet my gaze.

“You’re breaking up with her.” I wasn’t asking anymore. I was telling.

“Cal -”

“No. You’re fucking breaking up with her, Ryan. I don’t fucking share.”

He swallowed, and I felt his Adam’s apple bob beneath my hand, causing me to tighten my fingers around his throat.

“Even if I break up with her, that doesn’t mean that we’re... I’m still not sure if I’m...”

I snarled and pressed my face closer to his, using my free hand to jerk his chin up, forcing him to finally look at me.

“I knew this was going to happen. Last night, I told you that you would regret it, but you *begged* me to touch you. Now, what... you’re suddenly not sure if you’re into guys? News flash, Fairview, straight dudes don’t beg other dudes to suck their cocks. Not even when they’re fucking drunk. So stop being a whiny bitch and break up with that little Bible thumper before I do it for you.”

Ryan finally snapped his gaze to mine, and that spark of defiance I loved so much came to life. Abruptly, he shoved me hard enough in the chest that I was forced back a step.

“Get off me,” he ordered, and I growled but let him go. “You’re not the fucking boss of me, Callum. If I want to break up with her, I will, but I’m not doing it because you told me to.”

I felt myself chuckle, even though I wasn’t finding the situation very funny. Stepping in close to him, I pressed my mouth to his ear, noticing how his entire body seemed to respond to my breath against his skin.

“I don’t really give a fuck what reason you give her, but if you don’t break up with her, you won’t like the fucking consequences.”

I pulled away, and instead of seeing fear in his eyes, I saw a fucking challenge, and it made my dick annoyingly hard.

“What’s that look for, ginger snap?” I growled, and his cheeks turned an even deeper shade of red. I glanced down, and sure enough, he was hard again.

He narrowed his eyes when he saw where I was looking. “Don’t flatter yourself. You know fear makes me hard. It’s just because you’re threatening me.”

I smirked.

“Keep telling yourself that, baby. And besides, if fear really does turn you on, how do you expect Mother fucking Teresa to ever get you off?”

Without warning, I slammed him back into the wall and ran my tongue over his lips. He immediately responded, opening to receive me. Fucking

his mouth aggressively with my tongue, I palmed him over his jeans until he groaned and ground his hips into my hand.

He let out another needy moan, and I stepped back again, leaving him panting and gasping for air.

“Break up with her, Ryan. Now,” I threatened, before storming out the back door, leaving him pissed off and wanting more.



I WAS ALREADY TEXTING VOX TO GET A TRACE SET UP ON RYAN’S PHONE AS I stalked past the guest house. Clearly, the cameras hadn’t been enough if he managed to hide a whole ass woman from me.

The smell of weed hit my nose, and I glanced up to see Theo sitting on the steps to her guest house, smoking a joint. She was watching me with an amused look on her face.

I narrowed my eyes on her. “What the fuck are you looking at?”

She took a deep drag of her joint and chuckled. “Off to annul the wedding?”

I scowled. “Don’t even joke about that.”

She shrugged and offered me the joint. I considered it for a moment. If I was going to follow Ryan and Mary fucking Magdalene, I couldn’t hang around here for too long... though I would have a tap on his phone momentarily, so I could always crash their little date after getting a bit of a buzz.

Which, honestly, suddenly felt like a good idea. Maybe it would calm me down.

I accepted Theo’s offer and took a deep drag, unable to keep my foot from tapping anxiously.

What if he kissed her while I was here spending time with his crabby but surprisingly supportive sister?

Theo chuckled again. “Relax. I’m pretty sure she’s gay.”

I rolled my eyes. “Gay for Jesus, maybe.”

Theo barked out a surprised laugh, and I handed the joint back to her.

“Religious trauma?” she asked, and I nodded.

“Something like that.”

“Hmm.” She took a puff and coughed. “He likes you. I know he does. Ryan is just... he doesn’t like change, and he’s not very good with spontaneity,” Theo explained in between weed-induced coughs. I cocked my head to the side, suddenly much more interested in this conversation than I was a few minutes ago.

“They barely ever saw each other. I’m pretty sure they were both kind of using each other as a front because they think that’s what the world wants to see. *Especially* her. The only time they ever really hung out was when she had family gatherings that she wanted a date for. Other than that, she was never around.”

I couldn’t tell if it was the weed or Theo’s words that were making me feel way more chilled out. So maybe Ryan was telling the truth. Maybe he was breaking up with her, and he was just busting my balls about it because he was a closeted fucking *brat*.

“Why are you telling me all this?” I asked, tugging up my hood and shoving my hands into my pockets.

Theo shrugged and ashed her joint out on the steps before getting to her feet. “I don’t know. Maybe because I’ve never seen him look at someone the way he looks at you.”

Omg. *Swoon*.

“Or maybe things have just been way less boring since you showed up, and I’m not ready for things to go back to the way they were.”

I cocked my head again as Theo’s grin widened.

“Or *maybe*... I’m hoping if I help you lock down my brother, you’ll give me your sister’s number in return.”

Now I was smirking.

Well, well, well. Looks like Cassandra made an impression.

“I can give you her number, but I can’t be held responsible when she inevitably blocks your ass.” I snickered, and Theo’s lip quirked up.

“She won’t block me,” she said with the confidence of someone who hadn’t grown up with the headcase that was my sister.

I shrugged. “Alright. Fucking deal. You convince Ryan to give me a chance, and I’ll give you Cass’s number,” I said, holding out my hand.

Theo smirked and clapped her hand into mine.

“Deal.”

I grinned back at her. “Look at us! Pimping out our siblings for personal gain. We’re so charming.”

Theo chuckled and shook her head before jogging up the steps to her apartment. “Never said I was a nice person.”

I turned away as well, shooting her one last smirk over my shoulder.

“That’s lucky. Because a *nice person would* never survive Cassandra Walker.”

OceanofPDF.com

34



Ryan Fairview

As ridiculous as it was, I couldn't stop myself from comparing Joanna to Cal.

She was the complete opposite of him in every way, down to her safe, eco-friendly Prius. I sat in the passenger seat as she drove us to a local coffee shop, thinking about how much Cal would hate this fucking car.

Joanna was going on and on about how school was going and about the fact that she was considering adding some new psalms to her curriculum, and I could barely manage more than one-word responses.

The painkillers Cal had left for me were finally kicking in, and I was using my newfound brain power to analyze Joanna in a way I never had before.

She was pretty enough.

Average.

She was nice.

Normal.

She was polite...

Boring.

I scowled at that last word. That was mean and not true at all. I was sure she had some things about her that were exciting. I just didn't know her very well.

As she parked the car and I followed her into the cafe, I began to wonder if the fact that I didn't know her very well was *normal*.

We'd been dating for six months.

Six months! And I barely knew anything about her.

I'd known Cal for a few days, and he already knew what my favorite flowers were, how I liked my eggs, and that I boxed in my free time. He even seemed to be starting to get suspicious about my weird ability to see dead people.

I didn't even think Joanna knew what my favorite color was. To be fair, I didn't know hers either... though judging by her outfit, I would guess some shade of grey...

Cal's favorite color was definitely black or red.

He had horrible taste in music, and he liked to cook. He also seemed to be interested in spooky shit. He was always going on about how much he loved my house, and he was genuinely the only person I ever met who actually seemed interested in learning how cremation worked.

"How do you take your coffee, Ryan?"

I shook my head, snapping myself out of my spiraling thoughts to find Joanna watching me expectantly as she tried to order me a coffee.

Cal wouldn't have had to ask. He would have known I take my coffee black.

Cal didn't drink coffee. He preferred tea with milk. No sugar.

'Cause he was sweet enough already.

Jesus fucking Christ.

"Uhh, black. Thank you," I muttered. She gave me a polite smile and completed the order. We took our drinks to one of the empty tables in the cafe.

It was independently owned and not too busy, so there were a few options to pick from. Joanna slid into a four-top, and I took the seat directly across from her.

"So," Joanna started, taking a delicate sip of her coffee... or whatever it was she ordered. "You wanted to end our arrangement?"

I cleared my throat awkwardly and leaned back in my seat, suddenly feeling like an idiot.

“Uhm. Yeah. I think it’s for the best. I don’t feel like I’ve been fair to you.”

She blinked and cocked her head to the side.

“Why do you feel like you haven’t been fair to me?” she asked.

Well, that was a good fucking question...

“Uhm... well, I just. I barely ever message you. I don’t think I’m emotionally available. You deserve better.”

God, I felt like I was quoting lines from *‘Break Ups for Dummies.’*

She frowned, not like she was upset, but like she was processing what I had just told her.

“Is there someone else?”

I choked on my coffee. “What!? No! I mean... maybe. I don’t know. It’s really complicated. I didn’t cheat on you if that’s what you mean.”

Or... I didn’t think I did. I broke up with her before Cal sucked my dick... Did it count as cheating when he beat me off in the prep room? I hadn’t really had a choice in that, so I didn’t think so... though I didn’t really regret it happening... fuck I felt like an asshole.

“It’s okay, you know. If there’s someone else,” she said, and I almost choked on my coffee again.

“Wh-what?”

She was staring at me with a completely calm expression on her face. No way was Joanna kinky enough to be implying that she was okay with an open relationship... Was she?

“What do you mean by that?”

She sighed and folded her hands in front of her, giving me a stern look.

“Come on, Ryan. I know what this is. I don’t really need a *boyfriend*. I just need someone that my parents deem appropriate to accompany me to family functions. It keeps the pressure off of me to... marry.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Wait, so you... this was never real for you?”

She let out a soft chuckle. “Was it ever real for you? Ryan, we haven’t spoken to each other in over two weeks. I’m almost certain that real couples converse more frequently than that.”

I scratched the back of my neck awkwardly and shrugged. “I wouldn’t know. I’ve never really been in an actual relationship before.”

She gave me a look that made me feel extremely uncomfortable. It was close enough to pity that my stomach soured.

“Well. I apologize then, Ryan. I assumed that you entered this arrangement for the same reasons I had.”

“So you were just using me as a decoy for your parents? Are *you* seeing someone else?” I asked. I didn’t really care if she was. I just suddenly felt like I had been bumbling around, thinking I had everyone around me fooled, but really, I was sticking out like a sore thumb.

“Not at the moment, no. I’m honestly not interested in dating anyone right now. When I met you, I was just coming out of something with someone that... let’s just say my parents didn’t approve.”

Jesus, even Joanna had more relationship experience than I did.

Fucking Christ, I was pathetic.

We stared at each other for a long moment, and I wanted so badly to ask if her parents hadn’t approved because the person she had been seeing was a woman, though it didn’t feel appropriate.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I muttered awkwardly, not knowing what else to say.

“Don’t be. They deserved better. I wasn’t ready to be the person they needed me to be.”

For some reason, that struck a little too close to home.

Did Cal deserve better than me? Was I the Joanna in this situation? Oh god, I definitely was the Joanna...

The longer this conversation went on, the more and more crap I was beginning to feel, and this time it had nothing to do with the hangover.

“Anyway. With all that being said. I’m sure you can understand now what I mean when I say it’s not a problem for me if you’re interested in seeing someone else. However, I do wonder if you would still be willing to keep up our arrangement? All you would need to do is show up to a few family gatherings and pretend to be my date.”

I opened my mouth to explain that I didn’t think that would be a good idea when a massive tattooed hand slammed down in the middle of the four-top.

We both jumped, and I looked up to find Cal scowling down at us, his angry brown eyes locked on Joanna.

“Abso-fucking-lutely *not*,” he snarled, and Joanna’s face went white.

OceanofPDF.com

35



Ryan Fairview

Everyone in the cafe was staring, and I was getting that strange feeling in my chest again.

I fucking *hated* being observed. However, I was beginning to find that Cal commanded attention everywhere he fucking went. If there was attention to be had, he always seemed to be in the center of it.

“Cal, there’s no need to—”

Cal pointed his finger in Joanna’s face, his lip curled in an angry snarl.

“You listen to me, blondie. You’re done using Ryan as your fucked up arm candy. If you come anywhere near him again, I’ll send you to meet that God you have such a lady boner for.”

Joanna’s face was paper white, but to her credit, understanding seemed to dawn as she glanced back and forth from Cal to me.

She held up shaking hands in surrender and nodded. “Of course. I’m sorry. I never meant to use him. I thought we had a mutually beneficial arrangement.”

“Yeah, well, the arrangement is over. Now get the fuck out of here before I do you like they did Jesus.”

I slapped my palm into my face and groaned, sliding down in my seat.

“Holy fuck, Cal. Tone it down,” I grumbled, feeling like the entire world was closing in on me.

Joanna’s chair scraped back, and I heard her scurry away. I couldn’t look up. I knew everyone in the cafe would be whispering and staring at us. This was, like, my worst fucking nightmare.

Cal grabbed my wrist and pried my hand away from my face. I met his hard, angry gaze, and he jerked his head at the door.

“Get in the car.”

“Cal—”

“Get. In. The. *Fucking. Car,*” he growled, and I saw how serious he was. If I didn’t get in, he was going to make even more of a scene.

I nodded minutely and stood up, leaving my barely-touched coffee on the table. Cal stalked out behind me. He stayed so close to my back that I could feel the heat radiating off of him.

With surprising gentleness, he steered me toward the crazy black SUV he had been driving lately.

Soft nudges on my hips and a feather-light glide of fingers up my arm made me shiver involuntarily.

When we reached the vehicle, he reached around me and opened my door, jerking his head again in a silent order to get in.

I scowled at him. “I don’t need you to open the door for me.”

“Shut the fuck up, Ryan,” he snapped and slammed the door shut before I could respond. He jogged around the car and hopped up into the driver’s seat before punching the ignition.

His insanely loud robot music started blasting out of the speakers, and I noticed he had two small monitors installed on his dashboard that looked like a customized build. They flickered on and showed a GPS map and the rearview camera.

This SUV was super high-tech... How much money did Cal fucking have?

I glanced over at the angry mercenary in question as he pulled up his hood and slid on his Ray-Bans. He peeled out of the parking lot without saying a word, his tattooed fingers tapping on the steering wheel in... *agitation?*

I wasn't used to seeing him on edge like this. He was always flippant about everything and constantly making jokes.

I couldn't tell if I was upset that he was angry or somewhat thrilled that I had the power to make him feel this way at all.

That was fucked up, right? Definitely toxic... I just... it meant something to me that he was this upset over seeing me with someone else. I couldn't fathom *why* he was so obsessed with me, but for someone who had spent most of their life trying to be invisible, it was strangely validating to feel like someone cared enough to want me so badly.

"Cal, I—" I reached forward to turn down the horrible robotic noise coming out of his speaker, but he snatched my wrist and nearly snarled at me.

"I said shut the fuck up, Ryan. And don't touch my fucking stereo." He had to yell to be heard over the racket, but there was a weird muscle twitching in his jaw, so I let it go.

Settling back into my seat, I resolved to give him a few minutes to calm down as he drove me home. However, it didn't take long for me to realize he *wasn't* taking me home. He hopped on the highway and took an exit that led us away from Fairview Funerals.

"Where are you taking me?" I asked, feeling slightly panicked.

He didn't answer, and soon, the houses and shops around us became fewer and farther between.

After roughly twenty minutes, he pulled off the two-way country road he had navigated to and parked in what seemed to be an abandoned farmer's field. There was a dilapidated split rail fence a few yards away that marched around the perimeter of a grassy expanse of land that was likely used to house cows or horses. There was no one for miles, and I hadn't seen another car in ages.

He turned off the music and leaned back in his seat. Removing his shades, he ran the palm of his hand down his face and sighed. It was the most un-Cal thing I had ever seen, and I suddenly felt a bolt of fear shooting through me.

"Did you bring me here to kill me?" I joked, trying to lighten the mood. But when Cal looked at me, the smile dropped off my face.

Oh.

There was an agonizingly long beat of silence where the tension around us built, and I realized I may have made a grave mistake getting into the car

with him.

I knew he was a fucking murderer... Why had I trusted him not to kill me?

“Killing you would be easier. Trust me.” His voice was quiet and tired.

I didn’t like the way his brown eyes darkened. His pupils were much too large for how bright it was out, and he had that dead look on his face again.

I swallowed, and my dick hardened with the increasing rate of my heartbeat. He was so fucking scary when he was like this.

What was wrong with me that it turned me on?

“Cal, listen—” I tried to speak again. I wanted to tell him that I had been planning to tell Joanna *no* before he interrupted. As much as it didn’t make any sense, I couldn’t deny he made me feel things. However, he didn’t let me get a word out.

“No, Ryan. *You’re* going to listen.” His voice was low and dangerous. I swallowed again before nodding.

“I tried to do this the nice way. I tried to bullshit that we could be friends, but we’re not friends.”

“We’re not?” I asked, feeling strangely vulnerable at hearing him say those words out loud.

“No, Ryan. We’re not.” Without warning, his hand was cuffed around my throat, and he had me pressed back against the passenger window. “I can’t get you out of my fucking head. I know it’s wrong to force you, but I can’t help it. Fuck you for making me obsessed with you.” He growled. His lips were so close to mine that I could taste the peppermint on his breath.

“Whether either of us wants this or not, my screwed-up brain has decided that you’re mine, and I don’t fucking share, Ryan. Do you understand me?”

Completely enraptured and terrified at the same time, I nodded, but he gently squeezed his fingers tighter around my throat.

“I don’t know that you do.” He rumbled. He traced his lips against mine, and my mouth parted on reflex, but he didn’t kiss me. “Starting now, there will be rules, and I expect you to follow them.”

Suddenly, the spell I seemed to be under shattered.

Rules? Fuck that!

I was a grown-ass man. I ran a business. I made the fucking rules. Not some out-of-control, irresponsible *punk!*

Out loud, I scoffed. “If anyone should be making rules, it should be me,” I snapped, and Cal’s hand tightened even more around my throat. He released a dark chuckle, though there was no humor in his eyes.

“You want to make the rules, baby?”

“I think out of the two of us, I’m clearly more qualified to be in charge. I’m much more level-headed,” I shot back.

He let out another dry laugh. “Sure, Ryan. You want a chance to be in charge? You’re going to have to fight me for it.”

“Fine. But you have to fight fair. No pulling guns this time or taking me by surprise.” Nearly every time we fought up until this point, I lost, but Cal almost always played dirty. I was used to boxing, where there were hard and fast terms of engagement. I knew I could beat him on an even playing field.

A spark of fire ignited in his scary, dead eyes, and a tightness I hadn’t noticed in my chest loosened.

As much as I had this strange, twisted desire to get Cal all riled up, I didn’t like it when the rage crossed into that unnerving dead zone he sometimes slipped into.

He stroked his thumb possessively across my jaw and nodded.

“Alright. I’ll play fair. But when I win, there’s no fucking safe word, Ryan. This is your last chance to willingly submit. If I have to force you to submit, you will need to take whatever it is I give you. Consent now.”

Something about him forcing me to submit sent a fucking thrill through my body, and blood rushed to my cock at an alarming rate.

What would he do to me if he won?

Why did I low-key want him to win?

No, no. I wouldn’t let him win. This was bigger than just this one fight. Whatever happened in the next few minutes was going to set the tone for the rest of our relationship. I knew it in my bones.

I nodded once.

“Sure. I consent. It doesn’t matter anyway. You’re not going to win, Callum Walker.” I used his full name and switched my voice to the tone I used at work when delegating tasks to contractors.

The corner of his mouth twitched at my shift in demeanor.

“Get out of the car,” he ordered, releasing his grip on my neck.

I didn’t waste any time scrambling out of the passenger seat. Once I was out, he popped open the glove compartment and grabbed a small bottle of

something I couldn't make out. He shoved it in his back pocket and followed me out into the field.

OceanofPDF.com

36



Cal Walker

Alexa, play: Fistfight - The Ballroom Thieves

It was insane how easy it was for Ryan to trigger me. Honestly, I was pretty proud of myself for handling this situation as calmly as I did. When I walked into that cafe and heard that chick proposition him, I nearly murdered her right in the middle of that coffee shop.

The only thing that stopped me was the fact that Ryan would have, for sure, never spoken to me again. Like, even if I kidnapped him and tied him up, I didn't think he would ever get over me breaking an innocent woman's neck in front of him.

Sooooo, I let her go.

Womp womp.

He kept trying to talk to me in the car, but I needed a minute to gather my thoughts and figure out what I was going to do about him. The fact that

I had come that close to impulsively murdering a bitch was somewhat concerning.

I was definitely a little reckless at times, but even I knew better than to off someone in the middle of a public space in broad daylight. The fact that Ryan had the power to make me that crazy was a problem.

I'm not going to lie; I contemplated just killing him and being done with it for the majority of the drive. That was why I brought us to a secluded spot.

But, when he straight up asked me if I brought him there to kill him, and he looked at me with those fucking *gorgeous* brandy eyes—I knew I was fucked.

I would never kill Ryan Fairview simply because I couldn't own someone if they were fucking dead.

He was *mine*. As much as he didn't have a choice in it, neither did I. So, the only option here was to make it clear that he was officially off limits to anyone else.

I'd started the conversation intending to essentially tell him that. Imagine my fucking surprise when my little ginger snap decided he wanted to make a game out of it.

The game he proposed wasn't about whether or not we would be engaging in a relationship of some kind.

Nope.

It was about who was in charge of said relationship, which was not what I had been expecting.

The darkness that had been swirling in my chest since I had seen him sitting with that woman evaporated and was replaced with something much more safe and familiar.

My sweet, loveable little ginger snap wanted a fight for dominance, so a fight he was going to fucking get.

He was so cute and confident. He even used his '*businessman voice*' on me, like that made him the boss or something.

I just wanted to pinch his fucking cheeks!

God, I couldn't wait to fuck the sass right out of him.

I snatched up a bottle of lube on my way out of the car because there was absolutely no fucking way Ryan was going to win this fight. And once I inevitably beat him down, I was planning on finger fucking his ass until he agreed to all of my rules.

As much as I wanted to *actually* fuck him, I wouldn't be doing that today. I hadn't been kidding when I told him I was too big for him. There was no way I was shoving my dick up there until I had taken the time to properly prep him, so my fingers would have to do for now.

But as I followed him out into the field and he bounced on the balls of his feet, shaking his arms out to warm up, all I could think was how good he was going to look bent over with his ass in the air and completely at my mercy.

"You ready?" He asked, still hopping around like his feet were on fire.

I smirked at him.

"Oh yeah, baby. I was born ready."



I LET HIM TAKE THE OFFENSIVE. THERE WAS NO WAY I WAS GIVING HIM ANY chance to whine and complain that I had come at him without fair warning.

He wanted me to play fair? Fine. I would beat his ass fair and fucking square, then claim my prize.

I had to admit, he was pretty good. It was obvious he had been boxing for several years. He was no novice.

He moved like lightning, and I had to work harder than I would ever admit to evade his jabs.

I blocked his first right hook, catching it with my forearm. It connected squarely and sent a splintering shock of pain reverberating through my entire arm.

Fucking hot.

He didn't wait for me to recover. He aimed for my gut with a left undercut and caught me in the ribs. I braced against the impact, preventing him from winding me, and almost chuckled at the flash of triumph that glittered in his eyes.

Premature cele, baby.

I cracked him across the face, directly over the bruise he was already healing, and he grunted in pain, stumbling back and away from me.

"Come on, Ryan. Rookie mistake. You're better than that," I crooned, doing my best to pretend I wasn't out of breath. "Keep your fists up!"

“Fuck you!” he spat and came at me again with a devastating combo. I nearly laughed out loud when I realized he was legitimately trying to knock me out.

I blocked two jabs and dodged a cross just to get smoked with an uppercut.

He caught me so hard in the jaw that, for a moment, I worried he cracked a molar, but luckily, my cheek got in the way.

I spit out a mouthful of blood and grinned at him.

“Much better, baby,” I praised, waiting for him to come at me again. He rushed me, fists flying, and I laughed as I was forced to duck and block several well-placed strikes. We played like this for a few more rounds. Or at least, I was playing. Ginger snap was out for blood. He was *really* trying to actually take me out, and it was so hot I could barely get enough.

After several minutes, we were both panting and bleeding. His knuckles were split, and his right eye was swollen shut.

Fuck, hope he didn't have a service in the next few days. He was gonna be hella pissed about his face next time he looked in a mirror.

But he didn't seem to be worried about it right now. His gaze was on *fire*, and he had a half-cocked grin on his face.

He was fucking loving this as much as I was.

“Come on, Cal! Quit fucking around. I know you're holding back!” he yelled, and I shrugged.

“Wanted to give you a chance to get all your aggression out before I bend you the fuck over, ginger snap. I won't be tolerating this sort of behavior once you're under me, so enjoy it while it lasts.”

“Fuck you! I would like to see you try,” he snarled, and I grinned.

“Is that a challenge?” I purred as we circled each other.

“You bet your ass it is.”

I laughed. “It's not my ass that's on the line, baby.”

He flipped me off, and that was the final straw. He was right. I had been holding back.

You didn't survive in my world as long as I did by losing.

Ryan barely saw it coming when I stepped into him. He was expecting me to come in from the right since that was my dominant side. But I cut him with a left cross, followed by several quick jabs to the gut.

I hooked my leg behind his knee while he tried to catch his breath and just... *shoved*.

He went down.

Within seconds, I was on top of him. I flipped him onto his stomach. He was still trying to breathe past the vacuum I had knocked into his chest when I wrapped my hand around the back of his neck and crushed his face into the grass. Pressing my knee between his shoulder blades, I put my entire body weight on his back.

Leaning forward, I grazed my lips across the shell of his ear and reveled in the way he quivered beneath me.

He was so goddamn responsive.

“Undo your jeans and slide them down, Ryan.”

“*Fuck... you!*” He spat and coughed, his struggle for breath made worse by my knee on his back.

I sighed and used my free hand to undo my belt and pull it out of my belt loops. I stuffed one end under his neck and single-handedly threaded it through the buckle, creating a noose.

He groaned beneath me as the belt tightened around his neck, but I knew that groan.

That was his sexy groan.

I smirked.

Kinky little freak. The quiet ones are always the wildest ones in bed.

Almost as if he wanted to validate my internal thoughts, he seemed to inadvertently hump his hips into the ground as I tightened the belt further.

“Let’s try that again, Ryan. Undo your pants and slide them down. If you don’t, I’ll tear them the fuck off you and take you home with your dick out. You choose.”



Ryan Fairview

Alexa, Play: Talk - Hozier

I had never felt so alive. Anger and humiliation swirled deep in my gut at having lost the fight, but they were secondary to the fucking *thrill* that was coursing through me at being completely dominated by Cal.

Why was this so exciting?

Despite the fact that I was starting to wonder if I had a bit of a humiliation kink, I definitely did not want to go home with no pants on. So when Cal threatened to rip them off me unless I complied, I finally caved.

Plus, if I was being serious, I wanted to do it.

This was a game we were playing. It felt like he was forcing me, and it was giving me some weird sort of permission to do things I would never have the confidence to ask for on my own.

I had agreed to this. I could have just let him lay out the stupid rules he wanted and been done with it. But *I* had wanted to do it this way.

So, for once, I was going to stop being a pussy and fucking do it.

Cal didn't let up an inch as I wiggled my hands under my body to fumble with the button to my jeans.

I could feel my heartbeat in my throat where he had his belt wrapped around my neck, and my dick was so fucking hard I felt like I might come before my pants were even off. He was so heavy on top of me that I had to awkwardly wiggle and squirm beneath him to get my jeans down.

Then they were finally over the globes of my ass, and my cock throbbed at the deep sound of approval Cal made once I was exposed to him.

He shifted his weight so he was pressing only on my upper back, but he kept me under full control with the belt he had threaded around my throat.

"Good boy, Ryan," he praised me, and I groaned.

God, why was that so hot?

I couldn't see what he was doing, so I jumped in surprise when something cold and wet dribbled across my bare ass.

"What was that!?" I gasped, but he gently caressed me, smearing the substance over my crack as he made soft, soothing sounds.

"It's ok. It's just lube, baby."

Despite the excited thrill that shot through my chest, I thrashed beneath him at his words. He tightened his grip on the belt, forcing me to stop struggling.

"None of that. I'm going to need you to relax for me. I don't want to accidentally hurt you." He crooned, and I panted. My entire face was definitely beat red from the choke hold he had on me with the belt.

"Now, I'm going to ask you some questions, and you're going to be honest with me. If you answer correctly, you will be rewarded. If you answer incorrectly, you'll be punished. Understand?"

"Fuck... *you!*" I snarled, and he chuckled before slapping my ass so hard I fucking barked out a shout of pain.

"Fuck!"

He rubbed my stinging cheeks gently as I squirmed beneath him. My hard cock leaked and rubbed into the grass every time I moved.

"Strike one, Ryan. Are you going to be good? I can do this all day."

I found my hips were inadvertently grinding my dick into the ground. I was desperate for the friction. My mind was numb and almost blank. All the anxiety I usually felt about daily life stressors was weirdly absent, and all I had to do was listen to Cal's voice.

It was strangely... freeing.

"Fine," I spat, feigning an anger that I didn't really feel. Cal's deep masculine chuckle rolled through the air again.

"Good enough. But we'll need to work on that tone," he said as he lightly dragged his lubed-up fingers up and down my crack.

"Now, for the first question... Have you ever played with yourself back here? Remember, no lies. I'll know if you're lying."

The memory of experimenting that one time in the shower hit me like a Mack truck, and before I could stop myself, I found I was nodding.

"Yes. Once."

"Mmm. *Good boy*, Ryan," he praised, and he slid his wet fingers in between my cheeks. The lube made it so smooth and slippery. Suddenly, he was making direct contact with my asshole.

My cock throbbed beneath me, and I whined, arching back into his touch. I wasn't sure if it was so I could rub my dick into the ground harder or encourage him to penetrate me. It didn't matter; it seemed to be the right thing to do. Cal was clearly pleased with my reaction.

"Who were you thinking about while you did it?" His fingers danced and teased around my hole, and I was panting with anticipation. I wanted him to put them inside me. I wanted it so bad. My whole body was on fire.

"You, okay!? I was thinking of you."

"*Fuck.*" Cal groaned, and he lined one finger up with my hole before putting pressure on it. Not enough to penetrate but fuck, it was so close. "You're being so good. One more question before your reward."

I nodded, barely able to speak anymore. The anticipation was killing me.

"Next question. Do you want me to put my fingers inside you?"

I nodded again.

"Say it, Ryan. Tell me you want me to stick my fingers in your tight little ass."

My cheeks flushed with embarrassment, but I swallowed it down.

"I want it. I want you to put your fingers inside me."

It was the truth. I did fucking want it.

"Since you asked so nicely... Take a breath, and relax, baby," he coached me, and I hurried to do as I was told.

The pressure increased on my asshole, and he made soothing sounds as his finger finally pushed past the tight ring of muscle.

I cried out as he entered me, adjusting to the strange new feeling.

"That's it, baby. Let me in," he cooed, and I found myself alternating between humping the ground and pressing back into his finger.

"Fuck, you look so good with my finger in your ass," he growled, pumping it slowly in and out. I whined and arched again, but he tightened his hold on the belt and shushed me.

"Be patient, baby. We need to go slow; this is your first time," he said, but I didn't want to go slow. I wanted to come. The pressure was building, and I was leaking into the dirt beneath me.

"I'm going to add another finger. Breathe for me again."

I exhaled and groaned as he pressed another finger into me. The stretch burned at first but very quickly switched to intense pleasure.

"Cal...*fuck*." I gasped as he pumped in and out a few more times, getting me used to the sensation.

"Now I just need to find..."

His fingers touched a spot inside me that made my entire fucking brain explode. I jerked in surprise at the intense feeling of pleasure. He touched that spot again and chuckled with satisfaction as I seized uncontrollably in response.

"There it is. Does it feel good when I touch you there, baby?"

"Oh god...mmmpph, *fuck!*" I could barely form a complete sentence. I was shamelessly humping the ground now, grinding my cock into the dirt. I needed to fucking come. I could feel it building with an intensity I had never felt before. What the fuck was he doing to me that had turned me into this primal, quivering bundle of desperate *need*?

"Please, Cal. I need to come. Let me come," I begged, and he thrust his fingers in and out of me. He was making sure to hit that spot each time he penetrated me, but he was going so slowly that the build-up of my orgasm only seemed to simmer. It felt like I might never tip over the edge.

Fuck, my cock was so hard it hurt.

"I'll let you come, Ryan. After you've agreed to a few new rules."

"*Cal!*" I whined. "*Please!*"

"Rule number one: No one touches you but me. You are *mine*, Ryan. If you ever touch anyone again, I will fucking kill them, and then I'll make sure you don't sit right for a week. Is that clear?"

Even in my desperation, alarm bells started going off.

"Cal, fuck. You can't *kill*—oh fucking Christ, *shit!*"

He methodically rolled his fingers over that spot over and over again, building me higher and higher before pulling his fingers completely out of me, leaving me gasping and empty.

“Agree to the terms, or I swear to fuck, Ryan, I’ll never let you come again,” he growled.

“Okay! Okay, fine, fine. I won’t touch anyone else. Only you.”

I felt him squirt more lube on my ass and reinsert his fingers. This time, he added a third, and I moaned at the intrusion. My brain was fucking mush, and my cock was leaking all over my stomach.

“Rule number two: You’re never speaking to that Joanna bitch again. If I find out you have contacted her, I will kill her and make you watch.”

Jesus Christ, he was a goddamn LUNATIC.

So many questions were running through my mind, but I couldn’t think past the methodical stroke of his fingers. Like, what if she contacted me first? What if we ran into each other at the store? He couldn’t just *kill* whoever he wanted...

“Agree, Ryan. Agree to never contact her again.”

“I promise! I won’t ever contact her again. *Please, Cal.* Let me come!”

“Now for the third and final rule. If you agree to this, I’ll let you finish. Are you listening?”

He tightened his hand on the belt again, cutting off my air supply, which somehow just made me want to come even harder.

“Yes, Cal. *Please.*” I didn’t have even an ounce of dignity left, and I didn’t fucking care. He had turned me into an animal, and it was the most alive I had ever felt in my life.

“I’m not going to force you to officially come out, but when we’re in private, I’m allowed to touch you whenever I want. You will let me kiss you the way I want, fuck you the way I want, and suck you the way I want. When we’re behind closed doors, I’m in fucking charge from now on. You belong to me.”

My blood thrilled at the idea of all the depraved shit he might do to me if I agreed. He was knuckle-deep in my ass, and I was still mindlessly humping the ground. In that moment, I wanted nothing more than for him to have his way with me, and it felt like the easiest thing in the world to sell my soul to the dark angel that had swooped into my life on broken wings.

I nodded. Literal tears of ecstasy were spilling down my cheeks as he leisurely fingered that magical fucking spot he had found in my ass.

“Say the words, Ryan. I need to hear it.”

“I belong to you,” I croaked, and I could hear the smirk in his voice as he immediately increased his pace.

“Good fucking boy, Ryan. You can come now.”

I frowned. I had been expecting him to let me up and finish me with his hand, at the very least. But he stayed exactly where he was; the only thing that changed was the pace with which he thrust his fingers in and out of me.

“I thought you were going to—”

“I said I would let you come. I didn’t say I was going to touch you,” he growled as his fingers hit that spot again and again and *again*.

“Ah, ah, fuck!”

The burning pool of pleasure that he had been keeping at an intense simmer kicked up to an insatiable boil. I humped the ground faster and faster as he thrust deeper and deeper.

“Holy shit, I’m nnnngh, I’m fucking coming!” I cried out in shock just as my dick started spurting. I felt the hot cum shoot up my stomach and into the ground, dampening the earth beneath me.

Cal didn’t stop. He finger fucked me the entire time as I came and came and came.

It was the most intense feeling I had ever experienced in my life.

How had I gone so long without knowing my body could feel this good?

I twitched and jerked beneath him, and he praised and soothed me through the entire ordeal.

When I was completely spent, my body went limp. Cal removed his fingers and wiped them off on his shirt before gently rolling me onto my back. He straddled my hips, grinning down at me with the brightest, goofiest smile on his face.

I couldn’t stop myself from grinning back. My whole body was buzzing, and I felt so fucking relaxed.

“How was your first time getting your prostate stroked, straight boy?” he asked, leaning forward and pressing a tender kiss to my lips. I laughed against him before closing my eyes and kissing him back.

“I have a confession to make,” I muttered against his soft mouth.

He pulled back and cocked his head to the side. Giving me that quizzical look that sometimes reminded me of a curious puppy.

“What’s that?”

“I think I might be gay.”

He threw his head back and laughed, and I couldn't help but laugh along with him.

OceanofPDF.com

38



Cal Walker

I helped Ryan up and wrapped my arm around his waist in an effort to steady him on the walk back to the car. Outside of the beatings we had both taken, I was assuming his ass was relatively sore, considering that was his first real experience with anal penetration.

He tried to brush me off a few times, but I was my usual stubborn self and forced him to accept my help until he was tucked into the passenger seat of the G-Wagon.

We had laughed and kissed on the ground together in the aftermath of our depraved little altercation, but now Ryan seemed to have become pensive and despondent again.

I didn't like it.

I reached across him to buckle his seatbelt, and he scowled at me.

"I can do it," he snapped, and I grinned at him.

"I know you can, baby, but I want to take care of you a little. That was intense."

He held my gaze for a long moment but finally nodded, leaning his head back on the seat and allowing me to fasten him in.

I jogged around the car, hopped into the driver's side, and punched the ignition before draping my arm around the back of Ryan's seat and craning my neck so I could reverse back out into the road.

Once we were back on the two-lane street heading toward Cleveland, I gave him a cautious glance.

"How are you feeling about what just happened?" I asked.

Ryan shrugged, crossing his arms over his chest.

"I don't know. I don't really want to talk about it," he said, though his voice was sounding quiet and vulnerable.

I snorted. "Well, too fucking bad. If we're going to have rough sex like that, you're going to have to talk to me about it. Communication is really important."

He shot me an angry glare. "Don't act like you would listen to me anyway. You straight up said there would be no safe words if I chose to fight you on it.

Fuck. I did say that, didn't I?

Ryan: 1, Cal: -2

That's two fuck ups for me, right? Who's keeping track of this?

Probably Naomi.

I groaned and leaned my head back in my seat, shooting him an exasperated look.

"That was *before*. You weren't mine yet. Now that you've admitted to being mine, we need to set up some rules and boundaries. I need to know what you like, what you don't like, what are hard and soft boundaries... all that stuff."

Ryan was staring down at his hands awkwardly, his cheeks red as cherries beneath the bruises.

I frowned. "Is this about the gay thing? Or is it about the fact that I choked you with my belt and finger fucked your ass until you came?"

Ryan groaned and covered his face with his hands, sliding down in his seat.

"If it's the gay thing I told you already, I'm not going to pressure you to come out of the closet. That's your choice, and you can make it when you're ready."

“No. It’s not the gay thing... well, maybe it is a little bit, but just because it never once occurred to me that I might be, and that’s throwing me for a loop more than anything,” he finally admitted, and my chest loosened a bit. At least he was talking to me now.

“So, it’s the fact that you enjoy rough sex?” I pressed, watching him subtly out of the corner of my eye.

He shrugged.

“It’s a lot of things, Cal.”

“Like what? Tell me. I won’t judge you.”

He dropped his hands from his face but still couldn’t look at me. He stared resolutely out the window.

“I don’t know anything about you, Callum... Well, I know that you like tea and fancy cars and that shitty robot music.”

I burst out laughing. “It’s called dubstep.”

Ryan just gave me an unamused look and rolled his eyes. “It’s horrible. It sounds like robots fornicating.”

I felt my eyes widen and my lips part. “That would be... *awesome*.” I breathed, imagining how dope it would be to have a music video with robots jerking each other off to a Knife Party song. What color would robot cum be? Would it be like car oil? Or maybe that clear stuff they use to keep big computers cool...

My reaction to Ryan’s impression of my taste in music seemed to tug a reluctant grin on Ryan’s lips, though he winced. I immediately felt bad. His face was looking worse and worse by the minute.

Fuck. I had gotten carried away... *Why was I fucking like this!?*

“Whatever you say.” Ryan chuckled, settling back into his seat and closing his eyes. I hated how stiff he was. I wanted to draw him a hot bath and rub his shoulders until they were loose again. I wanted to kiss all his bruises better and tell him I was sorry for hurting him, despite the fact that I knew he had wanted it at the time.

“But I also know that you kill people, Callum. Do you know how hard it is for someone like me to wrap my head around it? How scary it is? I thought you were going to kill *me* today. Clearly, I have complicated feelings about you, and I think if you were anyone else, it would be easier for me to accept. But... I don’t know who you are, what you do, or who you work for. I don’t know if having a relationship with you will put my family in danger... put my father’s *business* in danger.”

He pulled down the car visor and looked at his face in the little mirror, grimacing.

“Like, look at my face.” He sighed. “Almost every day since I’ve met you, my face has suffered a new bruise.” He turned pleading eyes on me.

“How am I supposed to explain this to clients? When people come to meet with me, it’s usually after they have suffered the worst day of their lives, Cal. The last thing they need is a funeral director who looks like he moonlights as fucking Rocky Balboa.”

I snorted and resisted the urge to make a joke about being the Adrian to his Rocky.

“Okay. No more shots to the face, hard boundary.” I smirked at him, trying to lighten the mood. He let out a low chuckle.

“I suppose that’s a start,” he grumbled. “But the real issue is *why* do I keep letting myself get into these situations with you? This isn’t me. I’m always put together. I never have to worry about the business because I always have it under control. I always have a *plan*.” He cut me a hard look. “You, Cal, were not part of my plan.”

We sat in silence for a moment as I digested his words. It was difficult for me to understand his reservations because, for me, this was all very simple. In the words of the infamous Ariana Grande — I see it, I like it, I want it, I got it.

I saw Ryan.

I liked Ryan.

I wanted Ryan.

I got Ryan.

If someone tried to take Ryan from me, I would just delete them. Murder ‘em. Wipe ‘em off the face of the fucking planet.

Simple.

It seems Ryan’s brain didn’t work that way. He tried to coexist with the things I would normally just murder or remove from my life without a second thought. He needed to *control* threats, whereas I just needed to eliminate them.

If I wanted to be a part of his life, I was going to have to help him control the things that were getting in the way of me integrating into his life. I couldn’t just bulldoze through things with him, or he would never be happy with me.

I knew this. I just didn't know *how* to do it. Never in my life had I felt the need to try to blend in.

I didn't flex.

I didn't bend.

I was always just Cal, take me or leave me.

Looking at Ryan now, who was more tired and broken than I was comfortable with, I realized that if I wanted him, I was going to have to bend for him. At least a little bit.

"Okay. Well, I may not have been part of the plan, Ryan, but life is messy. I don't know about you, but my plans rarely play out the way they're supposed to. You just have to roll with it."

He sighed. "You make it sound like it's easy."

I shrugged. "It is easy. You just have to get out of that sexy ginger head of yours and loosen up. Everything's going to work out."

He gave me a look that was a cross between a scowl and bashfulness.

"How am I supposed to 'get out of my head' after what just happened?" He snapped. "I've never done anything like that before."

"Like what?" I asked, knowing I was being kind of a dick but wanting him to face his feelings for once.

"Like...*that*! I've never gotten in a fistfight that's led to sex. Normally, I avoid fistfights altogether unless it's for a workout...I've never... I've never had anyone choke me before or hold me down and... and..."

"Play with your asshole?" I offered, unable to keep myself from grinning, though I did my best to hide it from him.

"Fine, yes! It's humiliating. Why did I do that? Even worse, why did I... why did I..."

"Like it?"

He groaned and hid his face from me again, sliding further down in his seat like he wanted a hole to open up and swallow him whole.

Keeping my eyes on the road, I reached over and tentatively brushed my fingers through his hair. I held my breath, waiting to see if he would jerk away from my touch. When he didn't, I gently stroked him, enjoying the soft, shuddering breath he released as my fingers grazed his nape.

"Well, I think it makes a lot of sense that you would enjoy being forced to submit during sex, Ryan."

"Yeah, how do you figure that?" he asked, peeking over at me. His tone was sarcastic, but his eyes told me he was really listening.

“You’re a control freak. It’s pretty common for people who are dominant in their day-to-day lives to crave being dominated in bed. It gives you a way to escape. It lets you give control to someone else for a change. You don’t have to think; all you have to do is relax and let your partner make you feel good.”

I glanced at him, allowing my smirk to grow. “And I plan to make you feel *really* fucking good, Ryan.”

“It makes me feel weak.” He whispered so quietly I almost didn’t hear him. I frowned.

“You’re not weak for knowing what you want and allowing yourself to have it, Ryan. What you want in bed is not an accurate representation of who you are in real life.

“Just look at me. In real life, I’m basically a golden retriever. If you met me on the street, you wouldn’t know I’m actually a black cat sadist.” I winked at him.

“Or a murderer.” He sighed.

“Or that,” I agreed shamelessly.

He peeked at me hesitantly, biting his lip. “I did like it... you know. Being dominated by you.”

“I know you did, baby,” I purred, brushing a thumb lightly over his bruised cheek and giving him an affectionate smile.

“If you want to be dominated, you came to the right place. I’m a top, through and through. It’s like fucking kismet that you’re a sub. We were meant to be, baby.”

Ryan was still staring at me funny. “We’re... are we... *together*? Like a couple?” he asked, the blush in his face spread all the way to his hairline.

God, he was so fucking cute.

I raised an eyebrow at him and shrugged.

“I won’t allow you to touch anyone else, so call it whatever the fuck you want, but you’re mine.”

He scowled. “Well, are *you* going to be fucking anyone else?” he snapped, and I bit back an amused chuckle.

“Would that bother you?”

“Yes,” he said without any hesitation. “You can’t tell me I’m not allowed to see other people, then slut it up yourself.”

I burst out laughing. “Slut it up!? Jeeze, ginger snap, we don’t slut shame in this car.”

He scoffed. "I don't care what you did before, but if we're doing whatever this is, I don't need to worry about getting any nasty diseases from your butt whores."

"Butt whores!" I was full-blown laughing now.

"And I want you to get tested," he snarked, crossing his arms stubbornly over his chest while I wiped tears of laughter away from my eyes.

"I was just tested two weeks ago, and I haven't been with anyone since. I think I have a picture on my phone I can show you."

He eyed me suspiciously. "I find it hard to believe that you've gone two weeks without sex."

"Believe it, ginger snap. You're right. Normally, I need to get laid more than that, but Kyle's murder held me over. Besides, since I laid eyes on you, I haven't been interested in anyone else," I admitted, glancing at him again so he could see the truth on my face.

He was biting his swollen lip again, looking unsure. However, it was unclear whether he was unsure about the fact that I was clean or the fact that I had admitted Kyle's murder held me over from needing sex.

"Would you like me to get tested again just for peace of mind?"

He thought about it, then shook his head. "No. I believe you."

That made me smile.

Omg. He trusted me! Swoon!

"Now, for the rest of it, I wasn't kidding before about setting some hard boundaries. We got carried away today, but I agree that we should avoid marks on faces from now on for the sake of your business," I said, turning the car in the direction of my townhouse.

Ryan examined his face in the car mirror again with a grimace.

"I would appreciate that. I have no idea what I'm going to do about this. I have another service tomorrow, and I look like I tripped and fell into a meat grinder..."

"I think I know someone who can help with that." I winked, and Ryan gave me a curious look, but I just smirked at him as I pulled into a suburban area.

"I can't promise I won't mark you in other places, though. I murmured, turning onto my street.

Ryan gave me a careful look as if he wanted to ask me more about where I planned on marking him but was still too shy.

“Where are you taking me?” he asked quietly, frowning at our quaint surroundings.

“I’m taking you to meet my sister,” I said as I parked in the driveway of our townhouse. Quietly, I noted that Vox was parked down the street in my—well, I guess *his*—red Aston Martin.

I frowned. I could see his bleached head in the driver’s seat. That was interesting. I hadn’t asked him to swing by. Whipping out my phone, I fired off a text.

CAL:

What are you doing here?

VOX:

laptop emoji

CAL:

If you were waiting for me, you know you could have just waited inside, right?

VOX:

Eye roll emoji

I chuckled and glanced up just in time to see he had started the car and was now driving away.

Weird.

Getting out of the G-Wagon, I went to Ryan’s side to help him out, but he was already nearly at the front walk, his brandy eyes wide as he took in his surroundings. My lips quirked at the way his gaze seemed to pause on each of the garden gnomes he passed.

“I thought I already met your sister?” he asked, and I grinned.

“That was my older sister.” I winked and got to work unlocking the front door. “I also have a younger sister. She’s much less prickly than Cass, and luckily for you...”

I swung open my front door and gestured for Ryan to walk in.

“She’s excellent with makeup.”

39



Ryan Fairview

Cal's house was... not what I expected. For some reason, I imagined he lived in some dark dungeon of a basement filled with X-rated posters, gaming consoles, and improperly stored firearms.

Instead, I found myself standing in a bright, clean townhouse that was tastefully decorated in whites, golds, and neutral beiges. It could have been a model home, except for the obscene amount of gnomes gathered on every surface.

It smelled like someone had an essential oils diffuser running, giving the air a citrusy, fresh scent.

There was soft, dark classical music playing from what I assumed was the living room.

"Is that... Adam Hurst?" I asked, totally enthralled by the haunting notes of a cello drifting from the direction Cal was leading me.

Suddenly, I found myself in a living room/kitchen split. The kitchen had white waterfall marble countertops and modern pendant lighting. The living

room had a massive TV over an electric fireplace and two couches facing each other on either side of a crystal coffee table.

Sure enough, the TV was playing a dark academia playlist, and *Desolation* by Adam Hurst was pumping through the speakers.

A young woman with blond hair who had been curled up on the couch with a gnome-shaped pillow turned down the volume and twisted around to beam at us.

“Good ear! Yeah, I love me some dark and twisty classical music when I’m reading.” The girl beamed at me, though her smile faltered when she took in the state of my face.

Her mouth dropped open, and she immediately turned to glare at Cal.

“CALLUM JAMES WALKER!” she exclaimed, and he chuckled.

“Oh boy. You know I’m in trouble when she whips out the full name.”

“Well, what do you expect! Don’t even try to tell me that this isn’t your handy work!” The blond girl leapt up from the couch, tossing her Kindle next to her squishy gnome pillow.

Instantly, she was in front of me, reaching up to touch my chin and tilt my head from side to side.

She was tiny. Much smaller than either Cal or Cass, though, you could see the resemblance in her face. She had the same dark brown eyes and olive skin, and her hair was just as thick. You could tell she was naturally a deep brunette, though I had to admit the blond suited her.

I remembered what Cal told me about how he and his sisters had spent their lives trapped in cages in the early years of their lives. This must be Naomi, the one they had been worried might die from their mother’s neglect.

Looking at this young, vibrant girl before me, my heart squeezed with the unfairness of it. I couldn’t imagine anyone locking this little ball of sunshine up in a cage.

“Ryan has a funeral service tomorrow, and we were hoping you could help teach us how to properly cover it up.” Cal glanced at me, grinning. “No offense, but whatever you tried to do to cover it up last time just made it look worse.”

I sighed. He was right. The concealer I had smeared on hadn’t matched my skin at all and had just gotten really clumpy. The bruises had shown right through.

Naomi popped a hip and rested her fist on it, giving me a smirk and a critical up and down.

"Well, there's not much I can do about the swelling. You'll just have to ice your face and hope for the best. But I can certainly fix the coloring for you.

"I'll teach you how to do it here, and you can borrow some products and reapply tomorrow... actually, I don't have a lot going on tomorrow, so if you like, I can pop by and do it again for you."

My heart fluttered in my chest.

"You don't have to do that. I don't want to inconvenience you."

Cal moved forward as if he were going to wrap his arms around me, but I jerked away, frantically glancing at Naomi and back at him.

He immediately stopped and acted like he had just been moving to slide his hands into his pockets instead.

"It's not an inconvenience, Ryan. Trust me, if it was, she wouldn't have offered," he said, smoothly moving past my awkward inability to accept any form of affection from him in front of his sister.

"Ooo, Ryan? I've heard so much about you!"

Oh god.

"All good things, I hope." I winced, but Naomi just smiled at me warmly.

"Of course! Cal was gushing to me about you the other day."

"He was?" I asked, feeling like my heart was stuck in my throat. I didn't think anyone had ever *gushed* about me before.

"Mhmm." Naomi smiled. "And he's right, you know. It's no trouble at all. I'm happy to come by and help you. It'll give me an excuse to get out of this house and stretch my legs. I've been reading entirely too much smut lately," she announced and turned on her heel, leading the way upstairs.

My heart was pounding in my chest, and I was feeling extremely confused and guilty.

Maybe I shouldn't have pulled away from Cal like that... We had just discussed in the car that we were... *exclusive*, I guess. I should be able to let him touch me in front of people?

I glanced at him nervously, expecting him to be upset or hurt, but he just smiled at me and nodded his head in the direction his sister had gone, indicating that I should follow her.

My head was still spinning with too many thoughts as I followed Naomi up the stairs. Cal came up quietly behind me. I tensed, waiting for him to touch me from behind or make a big obnoxious scene, but he didn't do either. He just followed me silently and let me take in the many family photos that covered the wall on the staircase.

There were tons of shots of Cal and his sisters over the years. There was a picture of a teenage Cal buying an ice cream cone for a tiny Naomi while Cass held a bouquet of balloons. There was Naomi's high school grad photo next to Cass's university graduation photo. I frowned when I realized Cal didn't have any grad photos on the wall. No pictures of him playing sports, though it looked like Naomi had played soccer at one point. Cassandra had some black-and-white photos of her in ballet shoes and a leotard.

Cal was only in photos for things like birthdays and what looked like little family getaways. The rest of this wall seemed to be a shrine to Cass and Naomi's childhoods.

Hadn't he gone to school?

Didn't he have any hobbies he was interested in?

I glanced back at Cal to find him smiling fondly at the photos as we passed.

"I love this one," he said, pointing to a picture of a much younger Naomi at the beach with water wings on and two missing front teeth. Cass was showing her how to build a sand castle. Cal wasn't in it. I assumed he was taking the photo.

"Cass was so shit at making sand castles." Naomi laughed from up ahead of us. "And she freaked out every time she filled a bucket and discovered a crab hole."

"She's so dramatic." Cal grinned as Naomi crested the top of the steps. Cal and I followed her into a bright coastal-themed bathroom, and Naomi gestured for me to sit on the toilet.

"Yeah, but I'm glad she was there. You ended up having to leave early, remember?" Naomi asked as she dug through her makeup bag.

I glanced at Cal, and though he was smiling, I was beginning to understand him well enough to catch the flash of regret in his eyes. It was only there for a split second, then it was gone.

He shrugged nonchalantly. "Duty calls, little gnome. Someone has to fund your dark romance addiction." He winked, and Naomi laughed, pulling out what looked like a big yellow and orange crayon.

“I know, I know.” She sighed, though she was still smiling. Turning to me, she showed me the orange stick of makeup, and I eyed it appreciatively. She was going to use the orange to cancel the blue and purple in the bruises on my face. It was a technique I used when getting bodies ready for viewings.

“Ahh, smart.” I grinned.

Naomi laughed. “Just you wait, Ry-guy. When I’m done with you, no one’s going to even know you got your ass beat by my lovable but psycho brother, haha.”

She hadn’t been kidding. After gently cleansing and cleaning my face, she applied the color corrector to all the ugly purple and blue bruises. She followed up with what she informed me was concealer, then color-matched some foundation. Finally, she used some sort of powder to finish up.

“Tadaa!” She beamed, holding up a handheld mirror so I could see.

“Wow,” I said out loud, genuinely impressed.

I was still obviously puffy and swollen, but you couldn’t see the bruises themselves at all. I glanced up at Naomi, who was grinning proudly with her hand on her hips.

“This is amazing, Naomi. Thank you,” I said in awe, gingerly touching a hand to my cheek. Her work was flawless. She had been right. There was absolutely no way I would be able to recreate this on my own.

As if she could read my mind, she winked at me. “What time is your service tomorrow?”

“People should begin arriving around one.”

“Great! I can swing by at 10; does that work? That way, I’ll be out of your hair in case you have some things you need to do to prepare.”

I glanced at Cal hesitantly, and he smiled, giving me an encouraging nod.

“That would be great, Naomi. Thank you,” I said softly, and she beamed.

“No worries at all!” She packed up her makeup. Glancing back at Cal and me, her gaze flitted between us. I frowned and looked at Cal, who was leaning against the towel rack, his hands firmly in his pockets. They exchanged looks in a way that Theo and I sometimes did, as if they were speaking a silent secret language that only siblings understood.

Naomi grinned at me. “Well! I have some, uh, online shopping to do! It was really nice to meet you, Ryan,” she chirped cheerfully. “See ya

tomorrow!”

Then she was gone.

I frowned at her abrupt departure and moved to stand up, but suddenly, Cal was on his knees in front of me. He gently pinched my chin between his fingers and turned my head to the side, closely inspecting Naomi’s work.

His touch sent a spark of excitement through me, and my heart was thudding so hard in my chest that I was sure he could hear it.

“Beautiful,” he breathed, and I didn’t think he was talking about Naomi’s makeup job. Before I could respond, he leaned forward, leaving feather-light kisses on my cheek where the bruises were still tender beneath the makeup.

I swallowed, feeling shaky and nervous at his proximity.

“Umm, she might come back,” I whispered, pulling away slightly, even though no part of me wanted him to stop.

“No, she won’t,” he assured me, leaving a line of feather light kisses down my jawbone to the corner of my mouth.

His lips were so soft, and my entire body buzzed with his touch, but I couldn’t tear my eyes away from the bathroom door. It was wide open, and I hadn’t had time to wrap my head around what happened earlier. I wasn’t ready for anyone to see us together like this. It was bad enough that Theo had seen him giving me head the other night. At least *that* I could blame on the alcohol.

Gently, I slid my hand up Cal’s chest and pushed him back, clearing my throat.

“How about a tour?” I asked roughly, trying to subtly put space between us. My stomach was clenched with a confusing mix of arousal and anxiety.

I just needed some space.

Cal pulled back, his eyelids heavy. He gave me a lazy grin and nodded.

“Of course. Anything you want. What do you want to see first?” he asked, and I smirked.

“I want to see where you sleep.”

Cal’s grin widened. “Trying to get me into bed, ginger snap?” he asked coyly, and I chuckled, shaking my head.

“No. I want to learn more about you.” I gestured to the bright coastal bathroom we were currently sitting in. “I’m already surprised by this house. This isn’t anything like what I was expecting your home to look like.”

Cal stood up and slid his hand into mine, pulling me up with him.

“And what kind of place did you see me living in?” he asked me as he tugged me out of the bathroom and down the hall.

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Some dark, sketchy basement apartment filled with dead bodies. “

Cal burst out laughing, shooting a grin over his shoulder.

“Come on, I have more taste than your average serial killer. Couldn’t you tell by all my sick rides?” He shoved open a door at the end of the hall to reveal a large, clean bedroom.

The walls were painted a dark charcoal, and the king-size bed was low to the ground. The floating headboard was backlit with red LED lights, and the fluffy duvet was made of crushed black velvet.

I scanned the room, taking in the framed posters of what I assumed were various dubstep DJs playing at shows. Beneath the window on the far wall was a black desk that held three monitors attached to a PC with fiberglass casing and red LED lights that matched the ones framing his bed.

It *screamed* Cal in such a sophisticated, modern way.

I kind of loved it.

“I don’t know why, but I wasn’t expecting you to be this neat. For some reason, I expected your room to look like a bomb hit it,” I muttered, wandering farther into his room.

“Yeah, well. I don’t sleep here often. If I did, I’m sure it would be much messier.”

I turned away from a ‘*Tomorrowland*’ poster and frowned at him. He was leaning against the door frame with his hands in his pockets, watching me explore his space.

He didn’t sleep here?

A shot of something that felt suspiciously like *jealousy* exploded through me.

Was he sleeping at someone else’s house?

Did he just hook up with other dudes and stay with them?

“Where do you sleep if not at your house?” I asked, doing my best to keep my tone even.

He shrugged. “At... *work*.” He said work like it was a replacement word for something else. “I have a room there.”

That anxious feeling in my chest was back. I didn’t know what he did for work, but I knew it was illegal and that he was expected to kill people regularly. Outside of the whole gay awakening I was currently going

through, this was a huge reason I was so hesitant to admit I might have feelings for this tall, handsome whirlwind of a man.

I couldn't date a fucking murderer for real... Could I?

Cal's mouth quirked at the corner as he watched me process what he was telling me.

"You have a million questions. I can literally see them trying to shoot out of your ears."

"I do." I nodded, pressing my tongue to the inside of my cheek.

"Then ask me. I'll tell you anything you want to know," he said, and I sighed.

"That's just the problem, Cal. I don't know if I *want* to know. Won't knowing about what you do put me in danger?"

It was his turn to sigh. Stepping into the room, he gently shut the door behind him and made his way to my side.

He slid his hand around the back of my neck and rested his forehead against mine. It felt so intimate and *right*.

In the privacy of this room, I let myself lean into him. Tentatively, I allowed my hand to brush against his hip the way it wanted to.

Curling my fingers into his hoodie, I looked into his warm brown eyes and inhaled his masculine scent.

"You've been in danger from the moment I laid eyes on you, Ryan Fairview." He whispered. I trembled beneath his touch as he delicately traced his thumb over my lips. My mind was screaming at me to pull away, but my body wouldn't move.

Why did he have this effect on me? Why did my body crave him so damn much?

"That's what I'm afraid of," I whispered. "I'm afraid you're going to get bored of me one day and kill me."

Cal shook his head and pressed a gentle kiss on my lips. It was brief and tender and nothing at all like the harsh way he had touched me in the field earlier.

"Things are different now. You're still in danger, but you're no longer in danger of me, Ryan. I already told you I would kill anyone who touches you. That includes people who touch you with intent to harm."

"I don't want you to kill anyone at all, Callum." I sighed, finally pulling away. Not because I wanted space between us but because I wanted to be able to look at him better. I needed him to see how serious I was.

Cal gave me an uncharacteristically sad smile and let me go.

“That’s unfortunately not an option, ginger snap.”

I frowned. “Why not? Is it an impulse, like they say on TV shows about serial killers? Do you *need* to kill people? Do you enjoy it?”

His eyes widened in surprise, and he looked pensive for a moment.

“No one has ever asked me that before.” He chuckled.

“Well, I’m asking now,” I said firmly.

“It’s... complicated,” he admitted, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly.

“I don’t have anything planned for today. I have time.”

“I’m surprised you want to know.”

“Cal.” I pinched the bridge of my nose and flopped down on the edge of his bed. “You’ve forced yourself into my life and have asked me to seriously consider a romantic relationship with you. Even a *friendship* with someone who makes their living doing what you do would be a difficult pill for me to swallow.”

He was staring at me with a strange look on his face as if he was working really hard to understand my position on this.

“You said we needed to discuss hard boundaries? Normally, *homicide* would be one of mine. Unless you have a really good reason for why you need to kill people, Callum, I don’t really see how this is going to work.”

Cal grabbed the black and red gaming chair from where it was stationed at his desk and spun it around to face me.

He flung himself into it and gave me one of his usual cavalier smirks.

“Alright. Storytime. I feel like we need popcorn for this.”

40



Cal Walker

Alexa, play: Skinny Love - Birdy

“So, let’s start from the beginning, shall we?” I mused, feeling a pulse of excitement in my chest that Ryan seemed interested in hearing about my past.

Outside of Vox, I hadn’t really told anyone this story before. I couldn’t even really tell my therapist since doctor-patient privilege didn’t cover things like planned homicide. She would need to report me to the authorities, and Damian would be all kinds of annoyed.

I wasn’t worried about Ryan reporting me. If he had any plans to do so, he would have done it by now. Plus, I had his phone tapped, so if he ever called a number that could get him in trouble, I would know about it.

And yes, I meant get *him* in trouble. Because, as annoying as it would be to have to deal with a police report, Damian had his fingers so deep in the system that it would really just turn into one big inconvenience for him.

Ryan, on the other hand, would skyrocket to the top of Damian's kill list, and I would suddenly have my hands very full trying to protect my lil ginger boy.

But I digress.

"So, I already told you how I basically grew up in a cage, right?"

Ryan pursed his lips, and his face paled slightly. My heart skipped a beat at the clear signs of distress he displayed when I talked about how I was abused.

He always tried to act like he didn't like me, but just seeing how upset he was about the idea of me growing up in that shitty cage made me feel like, deep down, maybe he did care.

What a precious little bean.

"Anyway, one day, I broke out. I was able to find the keys to our cages, but there were only two on the ring. Of course, the third one was Naomi's key, and my asshole mother kept it around her neck.

"When Cass and I went upstairs to try to get help, our mom found us and attacked us."

Ryan's eyes were as wide as saucers, and his hands were clasped so tightly in his lap that his knuckles were white.

There was a beat where I considered telling him the truth about what happened that day, but I pussied out at the last minute. The fact that Cass had really been the one to kill our mother is something I hadn't even told Vox.

I was too afraid of what might happen to her if Damian found out that Cass was capable of murder. I had spent my entire life trying to keep Damian's attention off of my sisters; I wasn't about to risk them getting caught in the crosshairs now... at least not more than they already were.

"Well, when she found us out of our cages, she was furious. She went *insane* and tried to kill me." Without meaning to, I found myself lightly stroking my throat, where I could sometimes still feel my mother's fingers trying to choke the life out of me. Sometimes, I woke up in the middle of the night, feeling like she was strangling me.

"She tried to choke me to death, and she almost managed it too. I don't know how I got the knife, but I ended up killing her in self-defense," I lied, and Ryan looked like he was in physical pain.

"Cal —" He croaked, and I waved him off with an easy smirk.

“Don’t look so stressed out. I’m fine, and I don’t feel bad about it. She had to die. If it was between her and Naomi, I would choose Naomi every time.”

He looked like he wanted to say something else but thought better of it, so I continued.

“After that, Cass freed Naomi, and the police came. They took us down to the precinct and separated us. They put me in this quiet room, and everyone was really nice. They gave me lots of sweets and junk food.” I could remember it like it was yesterday, the first time I ever tasted a fuzzy peach. The way the rough, sour exterior melted away into that chewy sweetness was like nothing I had ever experienced before.

“Were they upset with you?” Ryan croaked. “For... for killing you mom?”

I shrugged. “Not really. I think they were mostly just trying to get to the bottom of what happened. Or they were, at least, until Damian found me.”

“Who’s Damian?”

I looked at Ryan, and despite the fact that I knew I would do everything in my power to protect him from the man who had stolen my life, I felt a small shiver of fear pulse through me.

I didn’t want Damian anywhere near Ryan... but I just didn’t feel like I could lie to him about this. Damian was such a huge part of my life, and he was directly the reason I couldn’t stop killing people, even if I wanted to. Ryan needed to know.

“Damian Ryker is my... boss, I guess, for lack of a better word. He runs an underground organization called Apex.”

“And you work for this organization? Apex?”

I nodded, tonguing my lip ring. “Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because if I don’t, Damian will kill my sisters.”



RYAN’S FACE WAS SO WHITE THAT THE MAKEUP NAOMI HAD PUT ON HIM WAS no longer matching his skin.

“W-what?”

I nodded. "You heard me."

"Why don't you... go to the police?" He gasped.

I chuckled at how cute and innocent he was. My little ginger snap still believed that the world was an inherently fair place, where the good guys always won, and the bad guys always went to jail.

He didn't know that the bad guys were usually posing as heroes.

Why do you think heroes always wore masks?

A part of me hated to be the one to take this comforting belief away from him. For a split second, I wished I had never met Ryan Fairview, and he could have just lived his life happily without me.

However, the thought was fleeting. I was a selfish fucker at heart, and now that I had found Ryan, I was never going to let him go. No matter how much it would be better for him if I did.

"Apex is... *big*, Ryan. It's bigger than you can imagine. Damian's influence runs deep. He has Supreme Court Justices on his payroll. How do you think he was able to walk into a soft room of a literal police station and obtain custody of me?"

Ryan blinked as he processed my words. I saw it the moment he realized what it was that I was telling him.

"How old were you when you met Damian, Cal?"

"Ten years old."

"And what did... What did Damian do to you after he took you out of the precinct?"

I gestured to the room we were sitting in.

"Well, first, he took me here. Cass and Naomi came too. He set us up with a guardian and had Cass enrolled in school. Naomi was still too young, but when she was ready, we got her set up in a nice private school as well." I grinned, remembering Naomi's first day in her adorable little outfit. She hadn't been nervous at all. Not like the other kids. She dove headfirst into the crowd of students, informing me that '*she was off to make some besties.*'

I frowned at Ryan's expression. "Don't look so sad, ginger snap. This was the best thing that could have happened to us. If you saw where we lived before this, you wouldn't be looking so upset," I said, feeling terrible about making *him* feel terrible.

Ryan swallowed so hard I could hear it. "And what about you? Did you go to school?"

I wanted to brush off that question. The answer was no, and I knew Ryan wouldn't like that.

But the truth was, it wasn't important what had happened to me. What was important was that Cass and Naomi got to go to school. Cassandra was so freaking smart. Even after missing out on her formative years of education, she still clawed her way into an Ivy League school and became the badass, high-powered lawyer she is today.

I gave her a hard time, but I was so fucking proud of her. She blew me away every single day.

And Naomi... She was this creative little social butterfly that got along with everyone. Even though she had this huge group of friends, she still always made time to stay home and spend time with me and read her books. Being able to watch her spread her wings and brighten the lives of those around her felt like such a privilege to me. I rarely thought about the fact that I hadn't had a chance to go to school because it had never mattered to me.

I didn't need to follow my dreams because my dreams had already come true. My sisters were safe and happy. That was all I ever wanted.

"Nah. No school for me." I shrugged. "They don't teach the things I needed to learn in the public school system." I laughed.

"And what sorts of things did you need to learn, Cal?" Ryan asked. His voice was so quiet now I could barely hear him.

"Oh, you know." I winked. "The basics. It was a lot of weapons training and learning how to... effectively *eliminate* people, if you catch my drift." I didn't know why I was feeling the need to be so evasive. I normally wasn't this uncomfortable talking about murder or even my methods for murder.

I was used to it. It was just normal. But something about the way Ryan was staring at me was making me feel oddly anxious.

His brandy eyes were round and so much shinier than normal... it was making me feel like maybe the way I had been raised was more problematic than I had thought.

Don't get me wrong, I knew what Ryker had done to me was horrible. It was why I had made him stop recruiting children as soon as I could... but there was just something so foreign about applying that same level of empathy and consideration to myself.

It felt like I was poking at a carefully crafted wall I hadn't even realized I had built in my mind. Suddenly, I was worried that if I poked too hard, a

bunch of bad stuff that I had unintentionally buried deep inside of me would come spilling out.

The air around me felt weirdly heavy, and there was an uncomfortable weight on my chest that I'd never felt before. Keeping my smile plastered on my face, I cocked my head in confusion as Ryan stood slowly and walked toward me.

I looked up at him, surprised that he had come to me for once.

"Did he make you kill someone, Cal?" Ryan asked, his gaze trained on mine so intensely that I found myself fiddling with the strings of my hoodie just for something to do with my hands.

I laughed and rolled my eyes, swiveling in my gaming chair nervously.

"Well, duh. I just told you the whole reason I can't stop killing people is because of him. The deal is if I work for him, he leaves my sisters alone." I huffed.

Hadn't he been paying attention?

I twitched in surprise as Ryan stepped between my legs, forcing me to stop my incessant swiveling. He tentatively curled his fingers around my chin and tilted my head up so he could meet my eyes.

What was happening right now?

Usually, I was the one that forced him to look at me...

Why was it so hard to look at him right now?

"How old were you the first time he made you kill someone?" Ryan asked gently, and my throat tightened at how angry he looked.

His tone was so soft, but his eyes were burning with a rage I didn't understand.

"Ten. It wasn't long after what happened with my mom."

I was mesmerized by Ryan's expression. It was like time slowed down, and I could literally see the effect my words had as they washed over him, one by one.

His face crumpled, and something in him seemed to break at what I was telling him.

Why did he look like he was going to cry?

He brushed his thumb over my cheek, and I felt my eyebrows shoot up as I realized my cheek was wet.

What the fuck?

I leapt up from the chair, forcing a laugh out, hoping it covered up the strange tightness in my voice.

Ryan didn't back away like I expected him to; he was still watching me with that serious look on his face. The one that was caught between tenderness and anger.

"Why so serious, ginger snap?" I teased, swiping my sleeve across my cheek to wipe the strange wetness away. "It's not a big deal."

He didn't look convinced.

"I'm not telling you this because I need you to feel bad for me. You asked why I do what I do, and now you know." I stepped into him, hoping he would back away from me like he normally did, but he didn't. He stayed right where he was, his jaw tight and his brow furrowed.

"Cal..." he said, stepping in closer to me. Suddenly, I found I was the one backing away.

"You know what? You said you wanted a tour, and we didn't make it very far, did we? Wanna see where the wicked witch of the east used to stay?" I grinned at him, snatching up his hand and dragging him out of the room. "We renovated it after Cass moved out; now it's a dope guest room. Naomi's so sick with interior design. Come see!"

Ryan didn't push me; he just let me lead him through the rest of the house and give him an enthusiastic, over-animated tour.

I put on my best show, laughing and grinning and whipping out all my best jokes. Each time the corner of his mouth tilted up, I felt a bleating beat of success shoot through my chest.

Keep 'em laughing.

I loved it when the people around me were smiling and laughing. Sad people made me anxious.

But no matter how many times I made him smile, none of them seemed to really reach his eyes, and I felt a sickening sense of guilt that it was *my* fault those smiles weren't hitting him properly anymore.

Alrighty then. No more talking about my sad boi past.

From now on, I would just focus on making my ginger snap happy.

I was good at that.

Just ask Cass and Naomi.

41



Ryan Fairview

After giving me a tour of the townhouse he shared with Naomi, Cal took me home. He remained positive and upbeat the entire drive, yammering my ear off about the horrible song blasting through the speakers.

He seemed to have made it his personal mission to get me to like dubstep, and I couldn't help but do my best to listen attentively.

After what he told me about his past, something inside me had definitely shifted. When I looked at him now, I could see the child in him. That small, innocent version of Callum that never had a chance to grow up properly.

He wasn't a ruthless serial killer with zero ability to feel remorse. Whatever Cal was, he was *made* this way. What broke my heart was the fact that he truly didn't seem to understand just how badly he had been abused.

This Damian Ryker guy had literally *groomed* him into being a child soldier and did so by dangling the safety of his sisters over his head as collateral. It was the kind of thing I had only ever seen in movies or on TV.

To know all that had happened to the cheerful man sitting next to me made me want to pull him to my chest and just hold him.

Cal pulled up in front of my house and turned his handsome grin on me. My gaze tracked his hand as he slid his Ray-Bans up on his head.

“Home sweet home, ginger snap.” He smirked, his brown eyes dancing with amusement. He rested his hand on the back of my seat and nodded at my house.

“Head on in, I’ll be back in the morning with Naomi.”

I could feel the heat of his hand from where it rested by my face as if it were some sort of power generator.

Somehow, I knew he was still deflecting and trying to distract me from our earlier conversation about his past. I wasn’t done talking about it with him, but he seemed to be entirely uninterested in revisiting the topic of Apex and his upbringing.

Sighing, I glanced at my house and then back at him. He was so beautiful. I could admit that to myself now.

His rugged, sharp jaw and warm olive skin made him look like some sort of sun god that had come down to earth to bless us with his smile.

Glancing down at his plush lips... lips that I had tasted *twice* now, I cleared my throat awkwardly.

“Do you... uh. Do you want to come in?” I asked quietly. Suddenly, I wasn’t ready for him to go. There was this strange new tension between us. It was different from the sexual tension I had been fighting since the first day we met.

This was the kind of tension that came from an unfinished conversation. I wanted to talk more about what had happened to him. Deeper than that, I found myself wanting to be a safe person for him to confide in. My fingers itched to pull him into me and hold him and soothe him because, despite the fact that he was still smiling at me, there was this sort of confused pain lurking beneath it.

Cal was hiding from me, and I didn’t fucking like it.

“I can’t tonight, ginger snap. Duty calls.” He winked, and my stomach soured at his gentle dismissal. I couldn’t tell if he was just saying that to push me away or if he really did have to ‘*go to work.*’

Either way, it made me extremely uncomfortable.

My disappointment must have shown on my face because he curled his hand around my chin and stroked my jaw gently.

“Aww. Baby, don’t look so sad. I’ll be back to bug you in the morning.” He winked again, and I couldn’t help the way my eyes fluttered at his casual yet possessive touch.

He let out a low hum and stroked my jaw again. “God, you’re so gorgeous,” he purred, and I watched his eyes darken at my obvious reaction to the way he was brushing his fingers along the side of my face.

I glanced at his mouth and swallowed. Fuck, I really didn’t want him to go. I didn’t want him going to Apex or to be anywhere near that man who had taken his life from him. There was this strange, fierce protectiveness welling inside me, and I found myself leaning closer to him.

I wanted to kiss him so bad.

I wanted to beg him not to go.

I wanted to tell him he didn’t have to hurt people. It didn’t have to be like that... but... what did I know? I didn’t have the means to protect him from someone like Damian Ryker. I was just a fucking mortician.

There was nothing I could do to stop a man like that from doing whatever he wanted to my...

To my... what? My *boyfriend*?

I shook my head suddenly, trying to rid myself of these confusing and very complex feelings that were suddenly taking over.

Cal dropped his hand as I shook him off, and I told myself I was imagining the look of disappointment that crossed his face.

Had he been waiting for me to kiss him goodbye?

Shoving away the wave of guilt that coursed through me at the thought, I cleared my throat and popped open the passenger side door.

“Later, ginger snap,” Cal said, his voice strangely rough. Pausing, I glanced back at him, taking in the way his dark brows were pinched together and the way his thick hair curled at the nape of his neck.

“Yeah. Be... uhm. Be safe, okay?”

The smile that spread across his face was so genuine I suddenly had no doubt in my mind the smiles he had been flashing me for the last hour had been just for show.

“I’m always safe, gorgeous.” He smirked, and I stepped out of the car.

Then, he was gone.

42



Cal Walker

I was feeling super fucking weird.

For the first time since I had met him, I wanted to get away from Ryan. I hadn't expected him to react the way he had when hearing about my past, and it was making me feel all kinds of fucked up.

The way he kept staring at me like I was some broken thing was stressing me the fuck out.

He was overreacting. My past wasn't *that* bad. Hadn't he seen my house? It was really nice... it was more than a house, it was a *home*.

Naomi had grown up *happy* in that house, and that was all possible because of the work I did for Ryker.

I refused to feel bad about it or feel sorry for myself for all the things I had needed to sacrifice to make that happen. Ryan just didn't understand.

Letting out a tense breath, I rolled my head on my neck, cracking it to release the strange uptight feeling that wouldn't seem to go away.

It was fine. I was fine.

Ryan would forget all about this in time. I would just have to do my best to avoid bringing it up again, and then we could go back to normal.

That made me chuckle.

Normal. HA!

Whatever Ryan and I had certainly wasn't normal, but whatever.

Shoving thoughts of my sexy, concerned redhead from my mind, I tapped the voice-to-text feature on my car phone and pulled up Vox's thread.

CAL:

Yoooo, you at Apex?

VOX:

Thumbs up emoji

Perfect.

I hadn't been lying when I told Ryan I actually had things to do. I had been slacking pretty hard on Damian's request to hunt down that squad of killers, and if I pushed off progress anymore, there would be hell to pay.

Turning back onto the highway, I made my way to Apex and what was sure to be a night full of stalking and potentially a little bit of violence.

Just what I needed.



I FOUND VOX IN HIS ROOM. EVERYONE WHO WORKED FOR DAMIAN HAD A room on base. There was also a mess hall where we could eat in groups and prepare for missions when the task called for it.

Vox and I had rooms on the same floor. This entire floor used to be filled with children Damian had collected over the years.

Many of them had been taken over by hired mercs since I had worked with Damian to stop recruiting kids, but it didn't stop this place from feeling haunted by their memories.

Damian found most of us the same way he found me. He had informants stationed in most major precincts, and they reported to him when a potential candidate came in.

He usually looked for children who had committed some form of homicide. He wasn't picky about whether or not it was self-defense or a crime of passion. They just had to have shown some sort of *potential* for violence.

It made us easier to train.

Many of us didn't make it to adulthood. The jobs we went on were dangerous, and most of us died in the field. Some kids never made it through training. Sometimes, their minds broke under the pressure. I wasn't sure what Damian did with the kids who couldn't handle it, but I told myself he put them back into group homes or something.

Maybe I was delusional, but I had to be sometimes, or my own mind would probably fucking break too.

I waltzed into Vox's room to find him at his desk, typing away on some code that took up all three of his monitors. His room was essentially a cement box. There were no windows in here, but he had plastered the walls with metal posters over the years, and his electric guitar and amp were nestled in the corner.

Flopping onto his unmade double bed, I rested my elbows on my knees.

"Hey Voxy, how's it hanging?" I asked, and he let out a silent sigh, spinning away from his screens to face me. He looked exhausted, and I suddenly felt bad for leaving him alone with this project for so long.

My gaze fell on the only other thing on his desk besides his monitors. It was a framed picture of him, me, and our friend Gavin from when we were kids.

I think we were sixteen when that photo was taken.

Gavin was smiling at me through the frame, his soft, light brown hair tumbling into his bright blue eyes. He looked like he should have been a surfer instead of a mercenary. Maybe he would have been if Damian hadn't stolen him away.

Much like me, Damian had found Gavin in a precinct after he'd been scooped up for self-defense charges. He'd stabbed his father thirty-six times with a screwdriver after the man had beaten his twin brother to death in front of him.

Much like Vox and I, Gavin made it through the early rounds of training. It wasn't until we were much older that he started to really fall apart.

We were in our early twenties when Gavin started talking about quitting Apex. At first, I thought he was crazy, but the more he talked about it, the more appealing the idea became.

Even Vox seemed tempted to join him.

Gavin knew Damian was holding my sisters over my head, and we had begun to plan a way to extrapolate them from his insanely complex web when suddenly, Gavin just... disappeared.

At first, I thought he had left without us, but deep down, I knew he would have never left us behind.

Vox thinks that Damian killed him.

The official story was that he died on a mission.

'He got sloppy.' Damian told me. *'His mark got the drop on him and shot him in the head. He's dead.'*

Vox never really recovered from that.

Vox had never exactly been a... *happy* dude, but Gavin's death really fucked him up. Vox's hatred for Damian tripled the day he told us Gavin was never coming back, and since then, he'd really been playing with fire when it came to our boss.

Jesus, I was really taking my time strutting down fucking memory lane today...

Shaking off the painful memories of our friend, I shot Vox a grin.

"Sorry, I've been a little MIA."

Vox's lip quirked up, and he held his fist to one cheek and stuck his tongue into the side of the other, making it look like he was thrusting an imaginary dick in his mouth. I burst out laughing.

"You have nooooo idea." I flopped back on his bed, unable to keep the dreamy smile off my face.

"He's so fucking perfect, Vox. He has no clue how fucking hot he is. And he's so *innocent*! Every single thing I do with him, it's like it's the first time, and he always gets this look on his face like I'm rocking the fuck out of his world. I can't get enough of him."

Vox grinned at me, his eyes sparkling with happiness. He really was my best fucking friend. He was a grumpy little fucker, but he was also my number-one cheerleader.

"Anyway, sorry. I'm clearly in the honeymoon phase." I laughed, and Vox shrugged, still grinning, which I took to mean *'No big deal.'*

“Have you made progress on our marks?” I asked, and he nodded, spinning back around and gesturing for me to check out what he was pulling up on the screen.

“Wow,” I murmured. “You have been a busy lil bee, my friend.” I reached around his shoulder and took control of the mouse, clicking through several phone records and email feeds he somehow managed to obtain.

I had no idea how he had done it, but he seemed to have been able to find where Logan lived.

“This is insane... I thought this guy was a professional? How did you find him so easily? You would have thought he would have encrypted this shit.”

Vox glanced at me and took back control of his mouse. With a few clicks, he pulled up a tattoo shop and pointed to the ‘About’ page, where there was a picture of an insanely sexy dude with dead eyes and a backward ballcap smirking back at me.

“Is that one of them?” I asked, and Vox nodded. He pointed to the email form at the bottom of the site, and I nodded, understanding.

This guy probably had his tattoo shop’s email on the same network as whatever email he was using to communicate with marks. Vox likely couldn’t get into the encrypted email but used this man’s work account as a back door.

“You’re a fucking genius, my friend.”

Vox smirked at me and pretended to brush his shoulder off.

Clicking through the email threads, I grinned. There, plain as day, was Logan’s home address. He lived on an old farm property on the outskirts of Silent Hollow. He had a trailer on land owned by an elderly couple that now lived in a retirement home.

Getting the familiar rush of excitement I usually experienced when the dots started connecting, I clicked through some more of Logan’s files.

“Jesus. This guy is going after some really nasty dudes,” I muttered. “I high-key don’t even want to kill them.”

Vox glanced at me, raising an eyebrow.

“I know, I know. We have to do it... just... look at this, he’s already killed like four pedophiles whose charges were pleaded down.” I frowned. This guy was hunting the same kind of people *I* hunted.

His most recent kill was a judge, just like Kyle, who was involved in several cases where the pedo wasn't charged, despite the copious amounts of evidence against them. I could understand why Damian wanted him gone. He relied on the system being corrupt. I just had a really fucking soft spot for kids.

Judges had all kinds of cases that came across their desks. They were bound to have a couple that involved minors that didn't go well.

Still, something about all this just wasn't sitting right with me.

I tongued my lip ring.

"Let's pay this guy a visit," I muttered, and Vox gave me one of his dangerous little smirks that I took to say '*Way ahead of you.*'

He pulled open an app on his phone and showed me a location pin.

I grinned. "Well *damn, Daniel.*" Vox let out a silent chuckle at my dated meme reference. "Let's get to fucken work."

OceanofPDF.com

43



Ryan Fairview

I woke up in a shitty mood. One, my face was fucking *killing* from the beating I had taken the day before. Two — I didn't have any texts from Cal.

I stared at my phone in disbelief, wrestling with the twisting pit of anxiety that had taken up residence in my gut.

There were no annoying breakfast announcements.

No threats to sexually harass me if I didn't get my ass downstairs.

No stupid gifs or flirty emojis.

Just... nothing.

I got ready for my day, shooting dark looks at my bouquet of lilies the whole time.

Things had been weird after he told me about his background... He'd seemed off when he left.

Was he not interested in me anymore?

Was I ok with that?

I couldn't ignore the bleating, panicked voice firing off in my head, screaming *no*. I wasn't okay with that.

Was he really over me? That quickly? Or was it something worse?

I knew he had been going to 'work.' What if something happened to him?

What if he got hurt!? I should have fucking kissed him goodbye...

Before I could even think about what I was doing, I tapped out a quick message.

RYAN:

Morning

I stared at the screen, waiting anxiously for him to open my message, but he didn't. My heart was pounding in my chest. Biting my lip, I hovered in my room, fingers poised over the keyboard. Should I double text? Did that make me desperate?

After another minute went by and he still hadn't read my message, I decided to say fuck it and fire off another one.

RYAN:

Are you and Naomi still coming by? My face looks like it got run over by a car...

Another few minutes passed, and still... nothing. I glanced at the time. I guess it was still early. Naomi had said she was coming by at ten am. Maybe they just weren't awake yet?

I ignored the nagging voice in my head that told me early mornings had never stopped Cal from barging into my house without an invitation before.

He's fine. Nothing happened. You're overreacting. He'll be here soon.

I went downstairs to find my mother making breakfast, and my heart sank.

Some part of me had been hoping that Cal would have been here and maybe just too busy flipping pancakes to notice I had texted him, but he wasn't.

"Morning, dear," my mother greeted me with a smile. "Coffee's on."

"Thanks," I muttered, grabbing a mug.

"Have you seen Cal around?" I asked, trying to play it cool.

"No, dear. He hasn't come by yet today. Are you expecting him?"

Well... *yeah*. I was always kind of *expecting* him. Whether I invited him or not, he just had a way of showing up.

“No. It’s fine. Was just wondering if you had seen him is all.”

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I nearly spilled my coffee in my hurry to check it. Ripping it out of my jeans, my heart sank again when I realized it wasn’t him. I frowned at an unknown number, feeling even more concerned when I realized it was Naomi.

UNKNOWN:

Morning! It’s Naomi! I hope you don’t mind; I got your number off your website. Haven’t heard from Cal yet this morning; he must have had a busy night. Just wanted to let you know I’m on my way! (Got the address off your site too!)

RYAN:

Oh, hey, Naomi. Of course I don’t mind. Do you need a ride? I can come pick you up.

NAOMI:

Nah, I’ve already called an Uber. Be there soon!

Well, at least he wasn’t just avoiding *me*. His sister hadn’t heard from him either. However, that just made me even more worried that something had happened to him.

The more time that passed, the more anxious I got. Naomi arrived to help me with the makeup, and I had to admit her presence made me feel calmer.

I gave her a quick tour, and she set up her makeup on the kitchen table, ordering me to sit down in one of the chairs so she could get to work.

“Don’t worry,” she said, smiling at me sweetly. “This is normal. He’s likely just undercover. He goes dark sometimes. It’s nothing to worry about.”

“If you say so,” I grumbled.

But I *was* worried.

I hated this.

What was more, the amount of anxiety I was feeling was making it even more difficult for me to lie to myself about my feelings for him.

What would I do if he never came back?

How could I just move on and pretend I had never met that fucking psycho who had made me come so hard I saw literal stars?

Was I just supposed to go back to business as usual?

“Do you need help with anything? Cal told me you run these things pretty much by yourself. I don’t have anything to do today, so if you need a hand, let me know,” Naomi said kindly once she was done.

She began packing up her makeup, and I gave her a grin that I had hoped was convincing.

“No, I’ll be fine. The funeral today will be held in the crematorium, so I don’t have the extra hassle of dealing with transportation, but if you want to hang around, feel free to. I can drive you back home after the service.”

Naomi beamed at me. “Really? As long as you’re sure I’m not imposing.”

“Not at all. My mother is in the garden if you want to head out there to read. It’s a beautiful day.”

She nodded and nearly *skipped* outside, and I found myself smiling after her. She was such a sweet fucking kid, and her upbeat nature reminded me of Cal.

My gut twisted again at the thought of my missing psycho. I checked my phone, doing my best not to spiral over the fact that he still hadn’t even read my messages.

Attempting to keep busy, I went through the motions of the rest of my day. I changed into my suit and greeted guests as they arrived.

Luther was feeling better, and he came by to lead the service in the crematorium. It was a small service with a handful of people crowded in the display room where many of our customers rented space for their ashes.

Everything was going relatively smoothly until one of the younger attendees started kicking up a fuss.

Luthor was reading the pre-provided sermon about the deceased when a young teenage girl who had been more or less silent and angry the entire time started making loud, sarcastic comments.

The young girl rolled her eyes and scoffed loudly when Luthor was reading the part about Mr. Hemmingsworth joining the rest of the angels in heaven.

“Ya fucking right. We all know that fucker’s burning in hell where he belongs,” the girl said. The entire room gasped, and the girl’s mother looked like she wanted to slap her across the face.

“Anna-Marie! Apologize this instant!” she shrieked, and the teen turned her angry eyes on her mother without one ounce of remorse on her face.

“Fuck you. You know it’s true. Honestly, you’ll probably join him when you fucking go.”

It was only the years of experience I had with grief that kept my mouth from literally dropping to the floor at this young girl’s words.

The entire room of people tensed as an awkward silence spread out over the course of a few moments. Luthor and I exchanged a look just as the girl’s mother finally seemed to snap back to reality.

“In the car! Now!” she shrieked, but the girl just rolled her eyes and turned on her heel. “Yeah, yeah. Whatever. Enjoy the fucking send-off,” she snapped and stormed out of the crematorium.

“I’m so sorry for my daughter’s behavior,” Mrs. Hemmingsworth said, looking around at the rest of her family anxiously. “She’s taking her father’s death pretty hard.”

I was about to assure her that it wasn’t a problem when a familiar, deep, masculine voice rolled through the room.

“Sounds to me like she’s someone who doesn’t feel fucking heard, but whatever helps you sleep at night, lady.”

My head shot to the side, and I felt a confusing mix of relief and horror to find Cal standing in the doorway of the crematorium.

I was relieved that he was here and clearly alive, but I was horrified that he had just spoken to a client like that.

To make matters worse, he, of course, was in his usual combat boots, shredded black jeans, and another black hoodie with a ridiculous saying on it.

This one said ‘*gayer than u,*’ and I nearly groaned out loud.

So fucking inappropriate.

“And who are *you*?” Mrs. Hemmingsworth demanded to know. Luthor was staring at Cal with his mouth hanging open, and the rest of the guests took a collective step away from him.

Fucking Christ!

“Uhm, everyone. I apologize for the interruption,” I found myself saying as I made a beeline for a very angry-looking Cal. I grabbed him by the arm and started to drag him out of the crematorium. “Luthor will continue the service; please make your way into the reception area for refreshments after you have had time to say your goodbyes.”

I pushed and shoved Cal down the hall, doing my best to remove him from the situation as quickly as possible.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing!?” I snarled at him when we were out of earshot, but he was staring over my shoulder as if he couldn’t let what he had heard in the crematorium go.

“What do you think the kid meant by that? Why do you think she said that?” he asked, and I growled.

“I don’t know, Callum. People say all kinds of shit when they’re grieving.”

Cal turned angry brown eyes on me, that strange muscle in his jaw jumping again.

“That didn’t sound like grief. That sounded like someone who survived something fucked up.”

I met his gaze and allowed myself to take him in. He was tired. I could tell.

He had dark shadows under his eyes that weren’t there the night before, and my gaze fell down to his neck, where there seemed to be a dark substance competing for real estate with his tattoos.

“What is this?” I asked, reaching up to touch the dark sticky substance. He jerked beneath my touch, and my fingers came away stained red. “Is this fucking blood!?” I gasped in shock.

Without thinking, I curled my fingers into the neck of his hoodie and pulled it away from his neck, frantically looking for the source of the blood.

Is this why he was late?! Had someone hurt him?

He chuckled and snatched up my hand, bringing my knuckles to his mouth and leaving a warm kiss on my fingers.

“It’s just a scratch, ginger snap. Calm down.”

Just a scratch?

I stood there, staring at him for a minute, doing my best to process everything I was feeling.

On the one hand, I was relieved that it was minor. On the other hand, what the fuck had he been doing all night that had him coming back bleeding?

I fucking hated this.

Jerking away from him, I took a deep breath and straightened my suit jacket, pinning him with a very serious look.

“I need to wrap up this ceremony. I would appreciate it if you waited for me outside,” I said, doing everything I could to keep my voice level and even.

His brows furrowed, and he reached out to touch my cheek, but I staggered back, anxiously glancing back up the hall to make sure no guests had seen.

Cal's gaze hardened at my reaction, and he scowled. "God forbid someone sees you out here with me," he snapped, and it was my turn to scowl.

"This isn't the fucking time. I am *working*." I gestured angrily to the blood on his neck. "You can understand that, can't you? Since you were too busy at 'work' to even send me a fucking text to let me know you were alright."

Confusion flickered across Cal's face, and he cocked his head to the side. His mouth opened, but I cut him off before he could say anything.

"Please. Get out of here before you make more of a mess of this service. People are here trying to grieve the death of a fucking loved one. I can't do this right now," I snapped, and he nodded, still watching me with that strange look on his face.

I left him standing there and returned to the crematorium with my heart in my throat and a pounding headache that I only ever seemed to get when Cal was around.

44



Ryan Fairview

The rest of the service went relatively smoothly despite Cal's interruption. As guests started to leave, I excused myself and went to hunt him down.

We needed to talk about some things, and the sooner we had this conversation, the better.

Leaving Luthor to deal with clean up, I wandered through the house searching for my mercenary. I found Iris and Naomi in the kitchen making cookies, and I couldn't help but smile at the wholesome sight.

"Hey, is Cal in here?" I asked, and they shook their heads.

"He was here earlier, but he went out back. He said he needed to talk to that girl out there."

My heart stopped.

"What girl?" I snapped, and Naomi's eyebrows rose in surprise at my tone.

"I don't know. There was this angry teenager moping in the garden. He went to see if she was okay."

“Jesus fucking Christ,” I muttered, pinching the bridge of my nose in exasperation before heading out the back to run interference.

Why couldn't he just stop meddling in shit that wasn't any of his business?

I stepped out onto the sunny porch and saw Cal sitting on one of the wrought iron benches in the middle of the garden with the angry teenager from earlier. Their backs were to me, so they didn't immediately notice me as I approached.

I was about to lay into Cal but paused when I heard what he was saying.

“It's okay to be sad, you know. Even if you did hate him.”

“I'm not sad. Fuck him.”

Cal shrugged, nodding. “I felt that way for a long time after my mom died. She was a huge bitch too. I fucking hated her.”

His callous words made me cringe, but then Anna-Marie turned to face him, and I was surprised to see a small smile on her lips.

“But you don't feel that way anymore?” she asked, and Cal shrugged again.

“No, I still hate her, so I felt really confused when I started to also feel sad whenever I thought about her.”

“I don't think I'll ever be sad that he's dead,” Anna-Marie said, scuffing her Mary Janes on the ground.

“I think I'm more sad for *me*, if that makes sense,” Cal said softly. “I think the little version of me deserved a mom who took care of him; instead, I got saddled with the psycho lady who birthed me. It feels shit. But it's okay, you know, to mourn that. To mourn the father that you never had instead of the one you lost. It doesn't let him off the hook.”

She was staring at him again, and even from where I was standing, I could tell her eyes were filled with tears.

“He really was a fucking asshole,” she whispered. Cal gave her a sad smile and leaned a little closer to her.

“Good thing he's fucking dead now. You win.” He winked at her, and she burst out into a fit of giggles.

“Anna-Marie!” I jumped out of my skin as Mrs. Hemmingsworth came around the side of the house. “There you are! I thought I told you to wait in the car.” She hurried forward and grabbed her daughter by the arm, pulling her away from Cal. Cal and Mrs. Hemmingsworth glared at each other, but thankfully, neither of them said a word.

Anna-Marie rolled her eyes but allowed her mother to drag her away.

“Yeah, yeah. Whatever.” She glanced over her shoulder at Cal and waved. “Thanks for hanging out with me, dude. See you around.” She waved at him, and Cal gave her a two-finger salute.

“Anytime, Kiddo,” he muttered, and I felt all the anger I had been harboring toward him melt away.

For a second, it was my father sitting on that bench, saying goodbye to the child he had just quietly comforted.

It was the part of the job that my father had always excelled at. George Fairview loved what he did because he really felt like he was making a difference in people’s lives. He helped people move on from some of their darkest days, and he was always a safe space for those who needed extra grief counseling.

What Cal had just done reminded me of that so much that my entire body erupted in gooseflesh.

Sure, my father definitely would have had that chat without using the f-word, but... maybe that was why Cal had been able to break through that child’s angry exterior. He spoke to her in a language she understood. He had treated her like an equal and made her feel like her feelings were valid.

Instead of shaming her for being angry and speaking ill of the dead, he had given her room to process those feelings and opened the door for her to move onto the next stage of grief when and if she was ever ready.

I was blown the fuck away.

“What’s that look for, ginger snap?” Cal asked, and I jumped again, realizing I had been staring at him.

A warm, tender feeling crept through my chest as I watched him watch me. He was surrounded by flowers, and the bright afternoon sunlight was casting caramel highlights on his dark hair. He really was fucking beautiful, even if he stressed me out more than anyone I had ever fucking met.

“That was... that was really nice. What you just did for that girl,” I said, coming forward to sit next to him on the bench.

He shrugged. “It was nothing. I’ve been there, you know? I’m sure it’s tough when someone you love dies, but when you hate that person, it’s tough too. Just in a different way.”

I nodded, though I couldn’t pretend to understand. The only person in my life that had died was my father, and I loved him more than anything.

“You’re mad at me again,” Cal said suddenly, and I glanced over at him to find him watching me with an oddly vulnerable look on his face.

I sighed. “I’m not. Not anymore, at least.”

“What you said before about me not texting you... I’m sorry, I didn’t realize you expected me to.” He fiddled with the strings on his hoodie. “No one usually expects me to check-in. Even Naomi is used to me being gone for a few days at a time.”

A jolt rocked through me. *A few days?*

Cal was watching me carefully, and a gentle smile tilted on his lips at my expression.

“You need to tell me what you’re thinking, baby. What’s making that gorgeous face twist up like that?” he asked, his voice soft but lilting with gentle amusement.

I crossed my arms over my chest and stubbornly looked away from him.

“If you’re slinking off into the night to murder people, Callum, I expect to hear from you more frequently than a *few days*. How am I supposed to know if something bad happened to you?” Without my permission, my eyes darted to the spot on his neck where the blood had been. He must have washed it off because it was gone now, but I couldn’t forget the shot of fear that had ripped through me when I thought he had been injured.

“Worried about me, ginger snap?” He hummed, reaching over to gently turn my face toward him.

The skin on my face ignited beneath his fingers, and my breath caught in my chest. Fuck, every time he touched me, my whole body seemed to light up in response. I wanted so badly to lean into him, but... we were outside in the middle of the day. Anyone could see us.

Maybe just a quick kiss?

My gaze darted nervously around the garden, checking to see if anyone was around. It was just us.

A quick kiss wouldn’t hurt—just to make up for not kissing him goodbye last night...

I was about to lean into him when he suddenly dropped his hand and scooted farther away on the bench.

“Sorry,” he muttered.

I frowned. “Why are you sorry?”

He shrugged, and this time, he was the one that wouldn’t meet my gaze. “I promised I wouldn’t push you to come out, and here I am, fondling you

in public.”

He chuckled, but it sounded sad, and it made my heart hurt.

I slid my hand across the bench and wrapped my fingers around his, squeezing them tight.

He glanced at me in surprise, his eyebrows shooting up into his hairline.

“I’ll admit, this is all a lot for me, and I don’t know how ready I am to start screaming from the rooftops that I’m... you know.”

God, I was pathetic... Why couldn’t I say it out loud?

“You know...” I tried again. “*Gay*.”

Cal didn’t interrupt me; he was just staring at me, somehow sitting so still I wondered if he was even breathing.

“But inside earlier, and even just now... That’s not why I’m pushing you away, Callum.”

He frowned. “Then why?”

I sighed. “This is my business. Yes, I live here, but during operating hours, I need to behave with a certain level of decorum. People don’t need to see their mortician engaging in PDA, no matter what gender their partner identifies as. There’s also a certain expectation for how you should be dressed if you’re walking into a service.”

I gestured to his outfit, and he looked down at his sweater as if realizing for the first time that it might be inappropriate.

“If you’re going to come around here while I’m working and insert yourself into services, you need to dress accordingly.”

“What, like... a suit?” he asked, wrinkling his nose as if the idea made his skin crawl.

I nodded. “Yes. Even Theo puts on a suit when she’s helping out, and trust me, I think she’s more allergic to formal wear than you are.”

He tongued his lip ring as if he were mulling what I said over.

“Okay. I can do that,” he said carefully, and I smiled.

“Besides...” I blushed. “I bet you would look really good in a suit.”

Cal’s entire face lit up at that. Threading his fingers through mine, he tugged me closer to him, his eyes darting around the garden to see if we were still alone.

He pressed his lips against my ear, and I shuddered in ecstasy as his hot breath tickled that sensitive spot he always seemed to find so effortlessly.

“Keep saying things like that, ginger snap, and I might have to steal you away.”

My cock twitched in my pants, and I swallowed.

I wanted that.

With him sitting here next to me after I had been so worried about him all day, I suddenly wanted to be alone with him.

I was tired of fighting the urge to kiss him and touch him... I just wanted to sink my fingers into his hair and show him that I wasn't ashamed of him, no matter how skittish I had been acting.

"I don't have any more services today..." I said quietly, my entire face flushing with embarrassment at how forward I was being.

Cal pulled back, his eyebrows raising in surprise. My whole body quivered in response to the nefarious smile that curved across his plush mouth.

"Take me somewhere, baby," he whispered, dropping a soft kiss on my neck right by my jawbone.

Forcing myself to push past all the anxiety and self-consciousness that seemed to always want to eat me alive, I stood up and tugged his hand.

"Let's go to my room for a bit." I smiled at him shyly, and he beamed up at me, his brown eyes shining in the sunlight.

"I thought you would never ask."

45



Ryan Fairview

Alexa, play: On My Knees - RÜFÜS DU SOL

We checked in with my mother and Naomi on our way to my room, and the two of them were giggling maniacally while getting dinner ready.

“What the heck are you two up to?” I asked, flabbergasted by the fact that Naomi seemed to be having the time of her life hanging out with my mother.

“We’re making dinner, dear.” Iris hummed happily as she seasoned what looked like a large roast.

“Your mom’s teaching me how to make her famous mashed potatoes.” Naomi was beaming with a massive smile that spread from ear to ear. Every time she looked at my mom, her eyes seemed to sparkle. It made my chest tight.

“So you guys are going to be busy for a bit? I have to, uh, help Cal with something,” I said, trying to sound casual. The evil grin Naomi gave me told me that she knew *exactly* what it was I would be helping Cal with.

I glanced at Cal, knowing my face was burning a bright red, but he was no help. His grin was just as devious as Naomi’s.

“We’re fine here! Iris asked if we could stay for dinner. Is that ok, Cal?” Naomi asked, and he nodded.

“I would fucking *love* to stay for dinner,” he purred, and I felt a warm rush of happiness at how genuinely pleased he seemed to be about being invited.

“Great. We’ll be right back.”

“Take your time, dear,” Iris said in her usual dreamy tone.

“Yeah. Take allllll the time you need.” Naomi winked, and my face became even more red.

Before I could pussy out, Cal grabbed my hand and pulled me out of the kitchen.

“Can’t wait to taste those taters! Don’t fuck ‘em up, Gnomes!” he hollered over his shoulder as he steered me down the hall.

I broke away from Cal and led the way to my room. He was close on my heels, and we scampered up the staircase like a couple of teenagers rushing to hook up before our parents got home.

I was barely through the door when Cal grabbed me by the shoulders and spun me around. He kicked the door shut behind us and slid his hands into my suit jacket, rushing me to take it off.

“Mmm, fuck baby,” he murmured as he grabbed me by the tie, jerking me into him. “I just want to rip this fucking shirt right off of you.”

I laughed nervously. “Don’t do that, it wasn’t cheap.”

Cal chuckled and pressed his soft lips against mine, leaving hot kisses across my mouth and down onto my neck.

“I’ll buy you a new one,” he growled as he tugged my tie off and ripped my shirt open so aggressively that the buttons rained down on the floor.

I gasped, my cheeks flushing again at how fucking badly he seemed to need me. His hands slid over my torso, leaving burning hot shivers across my abs.

“Cal...” I moaned as he pushed me back toward the bed. He tongued my pulse and nipped at my Adam’s apple, his hot breath making my dick swell between my legs.

“I just want to devour you, gorgeous. Do you have any idea what you do to me?” he rasped, dragging his mouth back up to meet mine as he pushed me down on the bed.

He crawled on top of me, and I whimpered against his lips, opening for him. My mind went numb and dizzy as his hot tongue slid against mine. He kissed me like he *owned* me, and the taste of him was so potent and intoxicating that I didn’t think I would ever get enough.

His tongue played with mine as he scraped his blunt fingernails down my sides to hook into my waistband, and I gasped.

Placing my palms on his chest, I pressed him back, and he literally *snarled* in my mouth.

I grinned despite the fact that his tongue was still in my mouth. Turning my face away, I pressed on him again so I could speak.

Cal snatched up my hands and forced them down on either side of my head, panting inches from my face as he ground his erection into mine.

I met his eyes and noticed how much his pupils were blown with an odd sense of satisfaction.

He was absolutely *feral*.

Feral for *me*.

“Don’t push me away, ginger snap; give me what I want,” he growled, rubbing the tip of his nose against mine. The unspoken ‘*or else*’ lingered in the air around us, and I nipped at his bottom lip, reveling in the deep masculine sound he made as my teeth sunk into the pillowy flesh.

“I want to... I want to make *you* feel good,” I murmured, swallowing each puff of his hot breath as he hovered above me.

Cal’s eyebrows shot up into his hairline as if I surprised him.

“You said the other night, if I wanted to... if I wanted to do it sober, you would let me.” I breathed, hating how red my face was.

Cal released one of my hands and threaded his fingers in my hair, jerking my head back to expose my neck to him. He bit and sucked at the sensitive skin, grinding his hard dick into mine as he worshiped my throat.

“You want to make me come, ginger snap?”

He sucked my earlobe into his mouth so hard I very nearly cried out.

I nodded frantically. “Yes. I want to.”

“Fuck... that’s so hot, baby,” he purred, dropping one more kiss on my lips before standing up.

He stood at the end of the bed between my knees, and I followed him up. Sliding my hands under his hoodie, I pushed the thick fabric up.

He crossed his arms and grabbed the hem, ripping the sweater up and over his head before tossing it to the side.

My mouth went dry.

Jesus Christ. He was like a fucking god.

My whole body froze, and suddenly, all I could do was look at him. I realized this was the first time I had seen him without a shirt on, and he seemed to have been carved from fucking stone.

Every inch of him was covered in black tattoos and muscle. I had a six-pack from all the boxing, but Cal had a fucking *eight-pack*. His chest was so perfect I couldn't help but run my hands up and over the hard mounds of his pecs, my heart stuttering in my chest as my fingers grazed his nipples.

"If you keep looking at me like that, ginger snap, I'm not going to be able to stop myself from fucking you." He hissed as I traced the intricate lines of his tattoos back down to the waistband of his jeans.

There was a line of dark hair that ran from his belly button into his boxers, and I suddenly wanted to run my tongue over it.

I swallowed.

"You have so many tattoos," I whispered, taking them all in. He had the word '*impulsive*' tattooed on the side of his neck, which made me smile.

At least he was self aware.

The rest of his chest and abs seemed to be covered in gears and intricate patterned linework. I frowned, skating my fingers over a large, ornate skeleton key that was vertically stamped in the center of his chest, just beneath his clavicle.

"What is this one for?" I asked, my voice so rough I barely recognized myself.

"It's Naomi's key," Cal said, his tone just as dark and full of need.

Glancing up at him, I swallowed again, the implication of what he had just said rushing through me.

His brown eyes softened, and he wrapped a large hand around my nape, brushing a thumb across my jaw.

"I don't want to think about that right now, gorgeous. Take my cock out," he ordered, and I nodded, dropping my gaze down to the button of his jeans, which were barely containing what I was sure would be a massive fucking dick.

Reaching for the button, I undid it with shaking fingers before pulling down his fly. The zipper sounded insanely loud as I pulled it open, and my heart was hammering in my chest.

Rallying up my courage, I decided to pull his jeans and his boxers down at the same time. My very dry mouth suddenly watered as his cock sprang free, bobbing in the air inches from my face.

I had never seen another man's dick in real life before, outside of the changing room in high school. Even then, I had done my best not to look.

The way my entire body reacted to the sight of it made me nearly whimper out loud.

I was so fucking gay. Yep. Super fucking gay.

I drank up the sight of him and glanced up in shock when I realized he was *pierced*.

"Did you... pierce your fucking dick?" I asked, completely gobsmacked.

He chuckled. "Yeah. It's called a Prince Albert. Got it when I was like, eighteen. Do you like it?"

"I don't... know," I muttered, still completely shocked that anyone would ever want a needle that close to their dick. Though I had to admit, I was fascinated.

"Touch it," he urged, and I couldn't stop myself from reaching forward to run my finger over the silver ring.

He flinched beneath my touch, and I froze.

"Did that hurt?" I asked, and he shook his head, grabbing my hand and wrapping my fingers around his cock. It was so soft but hard at the same time...

Holy shit, my mouth was fucking salivating.

"No, baby, it doesn't hurt. It feels good."

I looked up at him again.

This was fucking crazy. I was holding another man's dick in my hands!

"I've never done this before," I murmured, and he chuckled.

"I know, gorgeous."

"You're going to have to tell me what to do."

"There's nothing you could do that I'm not going to like, Ryan. Do whatever you think you would want me to do to you."

"I want it to be good, though," I breathed as I gently traced my fingertips up and down his shaft. I marveled as a shiny bead of precum

formed at his tip.

“You’re already driving me crazy, baby.” He groaned. “Just put your mouth on me. I promise I’ll make sure you know what I like.”

I nodded and leaned forward, gently touching my tongue to the bead of cum that had formed around the silver ring he had threaded through his tip.

He jerked again at my touch, letting out a muffled groan that made my heart swell with pride.

“Jesus fuck, Ryan, you’re so perfect. Give me that sweet mouth.”

He shivered and brought his palms up to cup the sides of my face. Feeling emboldened by his praise, I opened my mouth wider and slurped his fat tip into my mouth, teasing his piercing with my tongue.

“*Fuuuuck*, that’s good.” He moaned, sliding his hands up into my hair. He curled his fingers and guided my head down on him, groaning as I did my best to fit him all the way in. “Your mouth feels so good, baby; let me see you look at me while you swallow it,” he murmured, and I rolled my eyes up to meet his.

His eyelids were heavy, and his mouth was slightly parted as he watched me. The deeply intimate way he was looking at me made my dick throb in my pants. I was definitely leaking all over my boxers.

“Open wider for me, baby,” he urged, putting gentle pressure on the back of my head and easing me further down on him.

His piercing hit the back of my throat, and I groaned against him, running my tongue firmly on the bottom of his cock as I took him deeper.

Wanting to get even more of him inside me, I slid forward off the bed and allowed my knees to hit the floor.

I wrapped my hands around his hips and thrust him into my face, forcing his thick cock deep into my throat and opening as wide as my mouth could go.

“Holy *shit*, Ryan, you’re not even gagging.” He pulled out of my mouth slightly before plunging back in as if he were testing my gag reflex.

I felt him curl his fingers under my jaw and stroke my throat. “Are you sure you’ve never done this before? I swear you were made to swallow my cock.”

I pulled back and sucked on his tip again, shuddering with pleasure as he leaked into my mouth. I lapped up the salty taste of him, teasing the ridge of his crown with my tongue.

Fuck this was so good. Why was this so fucking good?

Cal made another guttural sound as I wrapped a gentle hand around his balls, fondling them carefully. I was getting off on every single grunt and groan that escaped his lips.

He was making those sounds because of me! I was doing that!

“Mmmphhh,” I choked as I slid my mouth back down to the base again, suddenly feeling like I would do anything to make him fall apart for me.

This massive, dangerous man was coming undone because of what I was doing to him. Something about it made me feel so powerful and special.

I looked up at him again to find him staring at me like I was the most amazing thing he had ever seen. He brushed a tear off my cheek with his thumb and raked his fingers through my hair as I bobbed on his cock, unable to get enough.

“Fuck, you’re going to make me come.” He groaned as I licked and slurped and *sucked* on him like he was a fucking popsicle.

“Is that what you want, gorgeous? You want me to come down this tight little throat?”

I nodded and sank down deep on him again, relishing in the way his fingers were curling into my hair.

“I just want to fuck your mouth so bad,” he whined, and I grunted, hoping he understood that I wanted that too. I just wanted him to take control. I loved it when he took over and used me the way he wanted. It made me feel free in a way I never had before.

“You want me to do it, don’t you?”

He put a little more pressure on my head, and I nodded. I could hear the smile in his husky voice at my consent.

“Alright, baby. Open up that beautiful throat. I’m going to fuck this sweet mouth,” he growled, and before I could even process what was happening, he was slamming his cock in and out of me.

“Mmmphhhh!” I couldn’t control the primal groan that vibrated out of my mouth as saliva dripped down my chin.

He held my head firmly as he pounded into my mouth. I think my soul literally left my body as I felt his balls tighten in anticipation of his release.

“I’m about to come, baby; swallow it all for me. Drink up my cum.”

I closed my eyes, doing my best to open my throat to receive him.

His cock started throbbing in my mouth, and I reached up to massage his balls as he came. Hot spurts of cum hit the back of my throat, and even

though he warned me, the sensation was new and came as a surprise.

I choked and sputtered on his release, and it pooled in my mouth, sliding down my chin as I did my best to guzzle it up.

“*Fuck*, Ryan. That’s so fucking good. Look at you, swallowing my cum like a perfect little angel,” he purred as I continued to bob on him, doing my best to take everything he was giving me. His praise made me feel so warm and safe. My head was spinning, and I thought for a moment that my life would literally never be the same again.

When his cock began to soften, he pulled me off him and used his thumb to wipe away the cum that had dribbled down my chin. He held his now-wet fingers up to my lips and pressed them into my mouth.

“Clean it up, baby. You made a mess,” he murmured, and I wrapped my lips around his fingers, sucking his cum off them the way he wanted.

Cal dropped to his knees before me and slammed his lips into mine, kissing me like he was a starving man in the desert. I curled my fingers in his hair and kissed him back, loving the way he sucked and nipped at my lips until they were swollen and puffy.

“You’re fucking perfect, Ryan,” he whispered against me, and a strange lump formed in my throat.

Why did it make me feel so good when he said things like that to me?

“Does that mean I did a good job then?” I joked, pulling back slightly so I could meet his eyes. He was grinning at me, his warm brown eyes sparkling.

“Yes, baby. You did a fucking *amazing* job.” He reached down and cupped my rock-hard dick over my suit pants, and I let out an embarrassingly loud whimper.

“Now it’s my turn.” He smirked. “Sit on the bed. I’m going to suck you till you forget your fucking name.”

46



Cal Walker

The sounds Ryan made as he came down my throat should be fucking illegal. By the time I was finished sucking him off, I was hard and leaking again. I didn't think I would ever get enough of my sweet ginger baby.

After he came, he turned into a quivering puddle of goo, and I climbed up on the bed and lay next to him, pulling him into my chest.

We were both fully naked together for the first time, and it was making it difficult to behave. I wanted to fuck him so bad, but I wasn't sure if he was ready to cross that line yet. He seemed to respond positively when I brushed my fingers over his asshole while I had been blowing him, but I didn't want to just do it quickly before dinner with his mom and my sister waiting downstairs.

When it happened, I wanted to take my time with him.

Make it special.

I had never cared about making sex special before, but Ryan was so different from anyone I had ever met.

Despite how shy and unsure of himself he was in the bedroom, the way he held himself in his day-to-day life was so attractive to me.

He always seemed to be so confident and focused when he was working. He was all proper and organized. My baby was an adorable little control freak, and I loved watching him calculate his surroundings and make decisions. He was always so thoughtful and seemed to take the time to weigh the pros and cons of every little thing.

I wasn't like that.

My brain just did whatever it wanted and made snap judgment calls that often got me into trouble.

It was partially why I loved taking control and dominating the shit out of my partners. Much like how Ryan wanted to relinquish control in bed, I sought it out. Because let's be serious, outside of the bedroom, I had no idea what the fuck I was doing half the time and was just winging it.

Sex, on the other hand... I knew what the fuck I was doing with sex.

In my real life, Ryan made me feel grounded. Like I had an anchor that was finally sturdy enough to hold me down and keep me from floating away in the sea of chaos that was my fucking life.

Laying on our sides facing each other, I stroked his face and left a gentle kiss on his swollen lips. He closed his eyes and hummed, making a warm but very scary feeling well up in my chest.

"That was... *amazing*," he murmured, and suddenly I felt like I was literally flying.

"You enjoyed yourself, baby?" I whispered, and he nodded, giving me one of his adorably shy smiles.

"We should do that all the time."

"Don't have to ask me twice." I smirked. "I'll suck you off anytime you want, gorgeous, just say the words."

He laughed and reached over to mirror the slow, languid strokes I was tracing down his cheek. I shivered under the gentle touch of his fingers and bit my lip.

Fuck, that felt good.

"I want to... to *suck* you, too," he whispered. "I liked doing it. A lot."

I smiled at him and gave him another gentle kiss.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. I didn't know it could feel like that."

“It gets even better, baby. There’s all kinds of things I want to do with you that I think you’ll like.”

He nibbled on his lip, and I swooned as his cheeks flushed red. I fucking loved that his complexion was so prone to blushing. It had become one of my personal missions to make him blush for me as much as possible.

“You look like you have questions.” I chuckled, and his already red cheeks darkened further.

“What kinds of things do you want to do with me?” he asked softly, and I was literally tingling with how cute and unsure he was.

“Well, one of these days, I would love to fuck you.” I kissed him, and he trembled, burying his face in my neck and circling his arms around my waist to pull me closer.

I grinned and wrapped my arms around him in return, holding him tight against me.

“Is that a yes?” I asked, burying my nose into his ginger hair and inhaling. He smelled like Old Spice and Head & Shoulders shampoo.

I’d smelled these scents on many other dudes, including myself, but for some reason, on Ryan, it smelled like fucking *home*.

He nodded his head, his face still crushed into my chest, and I laughed softly.

Pulling back, I curled a finger under his chin and tilted his head up to meet his adorably shy eyes.

“Use your words, baby. Tell me you want me to fuck you.”

He squished his eyes closed and groaned, his face officially so red it matched his hair. I just grinned at him and waited.

“I do. I want you to, to f-fuck me,” he whispered, stumbling over the words.

“Good boy,” I crooned, rewarding him with yet another kiss. His lips were so soft and sweet. Like fuzzy peaches. I just wanted to suck on them for fucking *ever*.

I watched him gather up the courage to look me in the eyes again, and he cleared his throat.

“Tonight?” he asked, and I laughed.

Suddenly such a needy little thing... I’ve officially corrupted him!

Bwahahaha!

Forcing myself to sober, I shook my head. “Not tonight, baby. I have to take Naomi home after dinner.”

I also needed to meet up with Vox and pick up where we left off, but I didn't say that out loud.

Vox was honestly pretty annoyed with me for how the night had turned out. We'd found Logan's trailer and shot a gas bomb into it, hoping to lure him out.

But he *hadn't* come out, and I got impatient and busted the door down. Looking back, it was stupid of me. That other guy, Ronan, had been with him, and we'd ended up in a bit of a shoot-out, which is how I got grazed.

Vox yanked me out of there to regroup before I had a chance to kill either of them, but I'm pretty sure I landed a hit on Logan at least. And now we had confirmation that the ex-cop and that tattoo artist were working together, so it wasn't a total wash.

I, of course, didn't tell Ryan any of this. I didn't want to ruin the moment by telling him that I had to '*work*' again. I knew he hated it.

Ryan frowned. "Maybe we can drop her off together and then come back here? You can stay over. Or I can stay at your place?"

I felt like the fucking Grinch on Christmas morning. I swear my heart grew two goddamn sizes at that moment. Telling him no was making me want to throw myself out the fucking window.

"Awh, baby, I would love that. But I can't. Not tonight."

I cringed as some of the light bled out of his hopeful, brandy eyes.

"You're going out again," he said, his previously shy and hesitant tone hardening.

I sighed. "Yeah. I have to. Damian has me on this mission, and it's been kind of a pain in my ass."

He pursed his lips, and I could tell he wasn't happy about it.

"I promise I'll text you this time," I offered, hoping that would make angry Ryan go away and bring back the cute, innocent, and surprisingly horny version of my ginger snap.

He pushed off my chest, and I sighed again.

Here we go.

I sat up and watched him get out of bed and pull on his jeans.

"Ryan..."

"I'm fine."

"No, you're not. You're mad again."

He ran his palm down his face in frustration, then again through his hair, before turning to look at me.

Fuck, he looked hot... standing there, freshly sucked, with nothing but jeans on.

"I'm not mad, Cal. I know there's nothing you can do about it. I just... I fucking *hate* it, okay?"

I followed him out of bed, pulling my own jeans on before sitting back down to listen to what he had to say.

"I know you do. I'm sorry," I said, finding that I actually meant it, too. I *was* sorry. I wished I didn't have to leave him. If I could, I would spend every second of every day following him around. But I just *couldn't*.

"I just... It *scares* me. I was so fucking worried about you all day today. I didn't know where you were or if you were coming back. What if you get hurt? What am I supposed to do then? It's not like I can come get you if I don't know where you are."

I chuckled. "Baby, it's usually me doing the hurting. You don't have to worry."

He rounded on me, looking exasperated and pissed off and worried all at the same time.

Fuck, I just wanted to put him in my pocket. He was so fucking cute!

"I hate that too! I don't want you hurting people, Cal. You shouldn't have to do that. It's fucked up that he makes you do that, and honestly, I can't stand thinking about it. You deserve better."

A strange cocktail of emotions brewed in my chest at his words. On some level, I obviously knew that hunting and killing people was wrong, but it was such a normal part of my life that I was desensitized to it.

What was shocking to me was he didn't seem to be upset on behalf of the people that I was killing. He seemed more worried about what the killing was doing to *me*.

Well... that was new.

"Ryan, it's fine. I'm super used to it," I said, though my voice wasn't as even as I would have liked.

Was it fine?

I'd never really asked myself that before. Well, maybe once, when Gavin tried to convince Vox and me to quit Apex with him. But other than that, I just accepted that this was my life. Mostly because it didn't really matter if I was fine with it or not; it didn't change my situation.

Ryan stalked toward me, and my eyebrows shot up into my hairline. He cupped my face with a surprising amount of tenderness, considering how

worked up he was.

“That’s not who you are, Cal.”

I frowned.

Uhm... come again?

“That’s quite *literally* who I am, Ryan. I’ve been doing this my whole life.”

This was a really weird conversation.

Why would he think I was anything other than a ruthless killer? We literally *met* because I was trying to fucking kill him. My mouth quirked in amusement despite the very serious look he was giving me.

His warm fingers danced across my jawline, and I bit back a shiver.

God, he just had a way of turning me into a useless puddle of nonsense.

“It’s *not* who you are, Cal. You’re not a killer. Not really.”

“I’m not?” I asked, my voice strangely quiet. He stepped even closer to me, skating his lips over mine so softly he was barely there.

“No. The real you is the man I found comforting that girl in the garden today,” he murmured. For some reason, my head was spinning, and I felt like my world was imploding.

“You’re kind, Cal. You’re selfless, and you always put everyone’s needs before your own. You’ve spent your entire life giving up everything to keep your sisters safe. You buy gnomes for Naomi because you want her to know you’re thinking of her. You put Cass through law school. You stood up for me when that woman was losing her shit on me for no reason... then you apologized to *me* after I yelled at *you* by buying me a bouquet of my favorite flowers!”

I chuckled, feeling all kinds of warm and fuzzy inside. “Yeah, but I also tried to kill you. That has to cancel out all that other stuff.”

Ryan glared at me, tightening his hold on my jaw hard enough that I swallowed.

“Yeah, you did. Because you thought I was a monster that was ruthlessly beating up a little boy. You were trying to protect him, Cal. Because that’s what you fucking do. You try so hard to protect and help everyone around you, but who’s protecting you?”

I felt my mouth part, but for the first time in like... *ever*, I didn’t know what to say. There were literally no words in my mouth, and my normally insanely busy brain just felt empty.

Ryan brushed his thumb over my chin and kissed me fiercely, nipping my bottom lip hard enough that I groaned. Before I could deepen the kiss, he pulled away, locking his furious, brandy eyes on me.

“It’s *fucked up* that this Damian guy took such a kind, gentle soul and turned him into a fucking killing machine. You were made to help people, Cal. Not hurt them. And I will never forgive the man who fucking took that away from you.”

OceanofPDF.com

47



Cal Walker

I was feeling all kinds of fucked up when Ryan and I made our way downstairs for dinner. The things he said to me were running through my head on repeat, and I could barely focus on what was happening around me.

Which sucked.

Because what was happening around me was fucking *awesome*.

Naomi and Iris were setting the table, and Naomi was proudly yammering away about what ingredients went into Iris' world-class mashed potatoes. I had never seen her so fucking excited, and I realized with a start that it was because Naomi was looking at Iris like a mother figure.

Ryan sat down, and we all gathered around, just like those families you saw on TV. Even Theo came out of her guest house to join us for dinner.

Iris literally lit damn candles for ambiance and broke out a bottle of red wine, which I had to decline because I was meeting up with Vox after this to hunt people I didn't actually have any interest in hunting.

Naomi proudly scooped her potatoes on all our plates and watched us carefully as we took our first bites. My chest felt tight as Ryan made sure to give her one of his best fucking smiles and tell her how they might be even better than when his mom made them.

The look on Naomi's face when he said that made my eyes burn.

Cass and I had tried so hard to give her the best life possible, but it was clear as day that she had still been missing something like this. Some kind of traditional family dynamic with a real parent and dinners full of homemade food and family recipes.

Even Theo made a big show about finishing her plate and smirking at my little sister.

"Not bad, kid," she grunted before taking a sip of wine.

For a second, I thought about canceling on Vox.

A version of what this night *could* be played out in my mind like the most perfect movie.

I could have a few glasses of wine with this family that I had forced myself into.

Once Ryan was feeling all warm and flushed from the wine, I could have teased him under the table and gotten him all worked up. Maybe even whispered all the things I wanted to do to him while everyone was busy with the dishes.

We could have cleaned up together and laughed. Maybe we could get Naomi set up in that room that Caleb had stayed in...

Then Ryan and I would have gone to bed, and I'd spend the entire night worshipping him and making him fall so fucking deeply in love with me that he would never let me go.

I would sleep in the same bed as him and hold him tight against me.

We would wake up together.

And then the next day do it all over a-fucking-gain.

My chest felt so goddamn tight as I watched my sister joke and laugh with Ryan and Theo while Iris smiled at us in that dreamy, accepting way she always did.

What would it be like for Naomi to have Iris in her life regularly? To have a *normal* family experience?

It wasn't fair that she only had me and Cass.

I wanted her to have *this* family.

I wanted this family.

Could I have them? Could I really keep them?

Would Damian ever let me?

The warm, strange feeling that had been welling inside me suddenly turned to ice.

Damian's whiskey-colored eyes blinked across my mind, and my fantasy was suddenly ripped to bloody shreds.

No.

Damian would never let me have this family.

Not really.

'You're my most important investment, Mr. Walker. I will always pay close attention to what you do.'

Something grazed my thigh, and I jumped before I realized it was Ryan.

He had put his hand on my leg discreetly under the table.

I turned to look at him, feeling like I was underwater. My insides were all twisted up with unfamiliar emotions like *yearning*, *sadness*, and *fucking fear*.

"Hey." His voice was low and quiet, as if he were making sure his words were just for me. "You're quiet tonight. Everything okay?"

I swallowed and nodded, painting on a smile.

"Of course, ginger snap." I winked. "How could I not be? I'm here with you."

His cheeks turned rosy, and he gave me his tiny, shy-guy smile.

"Good. Just checking."

Then he turned away to say something to Theo, and losing his attention felt like a cloud had just floated in front of the sun.

We all helped with the dishes, and Naomi thanked Iris for inviting us to stay.

"I'll wait in the car!" she chirped, giving me a knowing glance before skipping out the front door.

Fucking Gnomes.

She knew I wanted to say goodbye to Ryan in private. I loved that girl so much.

Ryan said bye to Naomi before turning to face me. I glanced at him, smiling.

"Dinner was amazing, ginger snap. Thanks for letting us stay," I said, and he grinned at me.

“Dinner together was inevitable.” He smirked. “Though maybe next time we will do it just me and you.”

My eyebrows rose in surprise, and I pressed closer to him, wanting to just wrap my hands around his hips and pull him into me. I stopped myself, though. I could still hear Theo and Iris in the kitchen, and I knew he would be uncomfortable with me touching him like that when they could walk out into the hall at any time.

“Are you asking me out on a date, baby?” I hummed, and he tilted his head back to meet my gaze, his brandy eyes glittering with a kind of mischief I hadn’t seen on his face before.

“Maybe.”

My heart skipped a beat in my chest.

“You’re making it really hard for me not to fucking kiss you right now, Ryan.”

He cocked his head to the side and frowned.

“Why don’t you?”

I glanced down the hall to where the light from the kitchen was spilling through the slats in the swinging door.

“Don’t want to accidentally out you in front of the fam.”

Then, to my absolute shock, he slid his hand around the nape of my neck and pulled me into him. My eyes widened in surprise as he pressed his plush mouth against mine, leaving a tender but somehow still firm kiss on my lips.

Once the initial shock wore off, I melted into it. With a fluttering heart, I slid my hands around his hips and pulled him into me.

This wasn’t like every other time we had kissed.

This one was slower. More casual. Like we had done it a thousand times, and we would do it a thousand times more.

For some reason, it made my throat burn, and I swallowed back against the tightness, digging my fingers into his hips as I did.

When he finally pulled away, his eyes were hooded, and he had a serene smile on his face.

“I should have done that before you left yesterday,” he breathed.

Jesus fucking Christ.

Did I die?

Was this heaven?

I swallowed and choked on a laugh.

“I *knew* you wanted a kiss yesterday.”

He chuckled and nodded. “I did. And I felt like shit all day today when I didn’t hear from you. All I kept thinking was if something happened to you and I never kissed you goodbye, I was going to feel like a massive asshole for the rest of my life.”

I raised an eyebrow at him and touched my thumb to his chin. “Well. I guess you’ll just have to make sure to kiss me goodbye from now on. If I die on you, we can’t have you living out the rest of your days jonesing for one last taste.”

Ryan’s playful mood evaporated at my words.

“Don’t make jokes like that.”

I bit my lip, immediately regretting the joke but still feeling a little touched that he even cared.

“Yeah, I’m sorry. That wasn’t funny. Nothing’s going to happen to me, though. I promise I’ll be fine. We’re just doing basic recon tonight; nothing should get physical.”

Ryan didn’t look convinced.

“Not to be a needy girl about it, but can you try to text me so I know for sure you’re not hurt?”

Chuckling, I stepped into him, dropping a kiss on the tip of his nose.

“I like you needy, baby. And yes. Of course, I can text you.”

He playfully shoved me in the chest, giving me a scowl, though I could tell he was putting it on.

“Good. Now get out of here before I turn into even more of a girl and ask you when I’m going to see you next.”

I grinned at his rapidly reddening cheeks and pressed one more kiss on his forehead before turning to leave.

“Night, ginger snap. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

48



Ryan Fairview

Cal didn't come back the next day.

True to his word, he at least sent me a text to let me know he was going to be gone longer than he anticipated, but still.

My gut was a fucking rock.

The only good thing was I didn't have any services. I wasn't in the right mindset to deal with people.

I busied myself with paperwork, and in the afternoon, I went to pick up a body that needed preparation.

The deceased's spirit, Mr. Renfrew, sat quietly in the passenger seat as I drove him to Fairview. He was a kind man, quiet and elderly. Thankfully, he wasn't feeling super chatty. I took it as a small blessing, considering I wasn't in the mood to help him transition into death.

Before snapping on my gloves in the embalming room, I checked my phone for what felt like the thousandth time.

The last text Cal had sent me seemed to mock me.

CAL SEX GOD WALKER:

Hey, baby. Checking in. All's good, just busy. Won't be back today like I thought. Maybe tomorrow! Xx

He'd sent that hours ago.

What was he doing that was so time-consuming that he wouldn't be able to come back tonight? What was he going to do for dinner?

I closed my eyes and shook my head.

I was overreacting and acting like a possessive girlfriend. I may not like what he did for work, but it was still *work*. When I was busy with a body or a service, it wasn't like I was on my phone all day. Why was I being so needy?

I wrestled with these scary new feelings, doing my best to convince myself to just give him some space. But... *fuck that!*

Space? When the fuck did Cal ever want space from me? Since I had met him, he'd been forcing himself into my routine whether I liked it or not.

He couldn't bully his way into my life, make me feel all these things for him, then just disappear. I may not be as outgoing as him, but I wasn't a fucking doormat.

RYAN:

Hey, it's been a few hours. You still good?

I waited, watching the conversation carefully to see if he would read my message or respond. He didn't.

Mr. Renfrew cleared his throat, and I glanced up at the spirit. He was looking at me with something close to sympathy in his eyes, but he glanced meaningfully at his body on the table and then back up at me.

'You going to get to work, son? My body's not getting any colder.'

I sighed, glancing down at my phone one last time before nodding.

"Right. Sorry." I muttered. I fired off one more text before getting back to work.

RYAN:

Just make sure you eat something if you're not coming back for dinner.

I paused, staring at my text and feeling like it wasn't enough. Without letting myself overthink it, I followed up with one more, even though I

wasn't double texting anymore... I was shamelessly moving into triple-text territory.

Buzz buzz, mother fucker. Answer me!

RYAN:

Be safe. Xx

Then I slipped my phone in my pocket and snapped on my gloves.

He was fine.

He was just really busy.

Everything was fine.



CAL DIDN'T COME BACK THE NEXT DAY EITHER.

Or the next.

I would have convinced myself that I had just made him up completely if it weren't for the fact that he sent me some variation of the same text each day. Every morning, I woke up to a confirmation that he was 'ok,' just, 'busy.' It was driving me fucking insane.

By the fourth day, I wasn't even worried anymore. Just pissed off.

I never asked for him to come into my life and make me care about him, but he *had*, and now I was waiting around for him to come back like some sort of bored housewife.

On the fourth day, I finally caved and texted Naomi.

RYAN:

Hey, Gnomes. Heard from your brother at all?

NAOMI:

Oh god. Not you, too! I'm doomed to be a gnome forever.

RYAN:

Haha, you don't like being called Gnomes?

NAOMI:

Eye roll emoji I guess it's fine. You're lucky I like you.

RYAN:

lol thanks, I guess.

RYAN:

So... your brother. You hear from him lately?

NAOMI:

Nope, but this is normal, Ry-guy. He'll be back as soon as he can. Don't worry about him. He's the dude all the bad guys are afraid of.

RYAN:

Right. Ok. Yeah, I'm sure he's fine, I was just wondering.

NAOMI:

Listen, all my pals are on summer vacation. I'm not doing anything today. You wanna hang out? You can take me for ice cream.

I snorted at that but smiled. I *wasn't* doing anything today. We had just wrapped Mr. Renfew's service, and because I had been obsessively doing everything in my power to get my mind off of Cal, I was super caught up on all my paperwork.

RYAN:

Sure. I'll come pick you up in an hour?

NAOMI:

Oooo yaaaaaas! Can we take the hearse?!

RYAN:

Lmfao. Sure. See you soon.

As much as I would never admit it, I was really glad Naomi had asked to spend time with me. If I couldn't see Cal, I supposed his little sister was the next best thing. Besides, maybe I could grill her a little more on his past. She probably knew him better than anyone.

Feeling slightly better than I had in days, I grabbed my keys and headed to Cal's house.

49



Cal Walker

This mission was going to fucking shit. These dudes were more slippery than goddamn eels.

I wanted to go back to Logan's trailer and just end shit, but Vox refused to let me after the stunt I pulled last time. He was concerned that because they were now on alert and ready for us, we wouldn't be so lucky, trying to jump them again, so we've been reduced to stalking them from a distance.

Low key, I was grateful Vox was being stubborn about it. If I was being honest with myself, I didn't *want* to kill these dudes. I liked what they were doing, and if Damian wasn't holding the safety of Ryan and my sisters over my head, I would probably fucking help them.

Vox had looked into Ronan Carter. When Ronan was a cop, he worked on several cases involving pedophiles. Some of the judges and lawyers on these cases had connections with Apex. Vox had the idea that we look into the defense attorney responsible for most of Ronan's targets getting off with

minimal or no jail time. His name was Dillan Zanetti, and he seemed like a massive douche canoe.

Looks like Ronan had been busy. He'd already murdered most of the pedophiles the justice system had failed to imprison, so it only made sense that he might go after the defense attorney next.

Again, I hated this. My heart wasn't in it at all. If I needed to straight up protect one of the pedos this ex-cop had already killed, I would have flat-out refused. However, I supposed I could stomach the defense attorney. He was technically just doing his job, and if it was between that guy and Ryan's life, I was gonna pick Ryan every time.

Our plan was to wait for them to attack Zanetti, then intercept, save the asshole they were trying to kill, and eliminate them in the process.

But they hadn't made a move, and I couldn't figure out why.

Vox gestured to himself and then me and gave me a knowing look.

Indicating that he thought they hadn't made a move because they knew we were here waiting, but I didn't understand how. I'd been leaving my phone in the car in case they were somehow using our personal devices to track us.

Which was *fucking* annoying because it was making it difficult for me to keep my promise to Ryan that I would text him regularly.

My heart broke every time I managed to get back to the G-Wagon and found multiple missed messages from my ginger snap.

He wanted me to come see him.

He was worried about me...

It was so strange and new. Sure, Naomi and Cass cared about me, but it wasn't the same. Neither of them checked in on me like this when I was on a mission, and it was heartwarming as *fuck* that Ryan was. It was also making me feel super fucking guilty about not being able to see him.

But as badly as I wanted to just say *fuck it* and go to him, we couldn't let these guys murder this fuckhole. Damian was beginning to lose patience with us. Ryan's texts weren't the only ones waiting for me whenever I had a chance to check my phone. I often had one or two from Daddy Asshole as well.

DAMIAN:

Don't disappoint me, Mr. Walker. It would be a shame if I needed to order you back for recalibration.

My eye twitched whenever I got one of these messages. I hadn't needed to be '*recalibrated*' since I was a child. I didn't really have any desire to go through that experience again, so when we hit day four, and these guys still hadn't made a move, I was feeling all kinds of irritated.

"Maybe we're wrong. Maybe this dude isn't actually their mark," I muttered. Vox and I were sitting in a cafe, watching Defense Attorney Dillan Zanetti order a fucking bagel.

Really riveting stuff.

Vox raised an eyebrow at me and shook his head. He was telling me he disagreed. This guy was definitely our target's mark.

I groaned and slumped in my chair.

"It's been four fucking days. I'm sick of this. This dude isn't even interesting. The closest thing he's done to anything somewhat questionable was pick his nose in his car the other day. Like, buddy, at least do it in private," I grumbled.

Vox shrugged and crossed his arms over his chest, refusing to back down.

I rolled my eyes. "I know, I know. It's part of the job. But we have to do *something*. They're clearly not moving on this guy."

Vox pinned me with a knowing glare and made that dick-sucking motion again, indicating that he knew exactly why I was being so irritable.

"Well, yeah. I miss him. I haven't seen him in four days, and I can barely even text him while we're out here."

Vox shook his head in warning, and I sighed.

"Come on, Voxy. Maybe we can just swing by Fairview so I can say a quick hi? Maybe while buddy is on his movie date?"

Zanetti was meeting up with his wife after his bagel for a matinee. We'd heard him talking on his phone while we tailed him in here.

Vox pursed his lips, and his silver eyes burned with annoyance. He didn't think it was a good idea.

"Come on, even for professionals, it would be hard as fuck to off someone in a movie theatre. Especially a grown man. We won't stay long. I just want to show my face, and then we can go back out."

Vox just glared at me, and I batted my eyelashes back at him.

"Puh-leaaaaseeeee Voxy? The theater is just around the corner from Fairview. Give me five minutes with him, then we can get back on this guy's ass."

Vox let out a silent sigh and shook his head, though this head shake was in resignation.

He held up three fingers and gave me his most stern, sexy vampire look.

I perked up, grinning at him like crazy.

“Ok, sure, three minutes. I’ll take it!”

He rolled his eyes, but the corner of his mouth lifted up.

“I know. You can’t say no to me. No one can; it’s part of my charm.”

He huffed and gave me the finger, but his heart clearly wasn’t in it, and I didn’t care.

I was going to see my ginger snap, and even if it was only for a few minutes, it was going to be *so fucking worth it*.

OceanofPDF.com

50



Ryan Fairview

Naomi came back to Fairview with me after ice cream. We were spending time with my mother in the kitchen when my phone buzzed, and I nearly leapt out of my chair to check it.

Naomi smirked at me and exchanged a look with Iris, who gave her a knowing smile.

“He’s been missing his dark angel,” she explained, and Naomi’s eyes flashed.

“I’ve noticed,” she snickered, and I gave them both one of my signature grumpy scowls.

Ignoring them, I checked my phone, and my heart fucking *soared* when I saw that the message was, in fact, from Cal.

CAL SEX GOD WALKER:

Ginger snaaaaapppp! Come outside, baby. Be quick. I don’t have long.

Doing my best to control the sudden aching need to literally *run* to my psycho, I grunted a quick '*I'll be right back*' and stalked out of the room as fast as I could.

As soon as I was out of the kitchen, my clipped walk turned into a shameless jog, and I burst out the front door to find Cal leaning against the hood of his G wagon with a giant smile on his face.

My own face broke out into a massive grin at the sight of him until I realized he wasn't alone. Standing uncomfortably close to him was a fucking *gorgeous* man smoking a cigarette. He had bleached white hair and beautiful skin that was just as bronzed as Cal's, and he was wearing all-black, worn-out clothes.

They looked like a fucking couple, with their matching punk aesthetics, and something that felt a lot like *jealousy* ripped through me.

I glanced down at my grey T-shirt and relaxed-fit blue jeans, suddenly feeling out of place and stupid standing in front of the two of them.

Is this who Cal had been spending the last four days with?

The smile dropped off my face, and my pace significantly slowed as I adjusted to the presence of this new, intimidating man.

He was staring at me with amusement dancing in his silver eyes, and I stared right back, unable to keep the glare off my face.

Cal pushed up off the hood of the car and walked toward me. I tore my gaze away from the random dude he had shown up with and turned to face him.

My mouth went dry as I took him in. Even though I had so many questions about this strange man and what they had been doing together for the past four days, the sight of Cal's gorgeous smile had me weak at the knees.

God, I fucking missed him.

He moved like he was going to touch my face or pull me in for a kiss, but he stopped himself, and I scowled.

Did he not want to kiss me in front of his butt whore?

Fuck that!

I slid my hand possessively around the back of his neck and pulled him into me, slamming my mouth against his. Cal let out a surprised '*mmph!*' but smiled against my lips as he wrapped his arms around me, zipping our bodies together.

Cal's eyes closed as he kissed me, but I kept mine open so I could glare at the silver-haired vampire over his shoulder, making sure he knew that Cal was fucking *mine*.

The vampire's eyes crinkled in amusement, and he took another lazy drag from his cigarette while he watched me bite and suck at Cal's lips.

After a few moments of excessive PDA, Cal finally pulled away, laughing. He rubbed his thumbs over my hips and grinned down at me.

"Wow. I'm going to have to leave you alone more often if every time I come back you're going to greet me like *that*," he beamed.

I glowered at him.

"I would rather you not leave at all," I snapped but immediately softened, knowing I was being fucking ridiculous.

What had gotten into me? I was acting crazy.

"Baby, as soon as I wrap this mission and I'm back on leave, we'll be spending every minute together. I promise," he said, cupping my face and giving me another tender kiss on the lips. "I can't believe you just kissed me outside in broad daylight."

I hadn't even thought about that. In my need to stake a claim in front of his potential butt whore, my need to stay closeted had taken a back seat.

"Who's that?" I asked, nodding my head at the silver-haired man. Even to me, my tone sounded accusatory. Cal frowned and glanced over his shoulder.

"Oh! That's my buddy, Vox. We work together."

I raised a disbelieving eyebrow.

"Your *buddy*?" I had to stop myself from saying *butt buddy*.

Cal's eyes searched mine, and slowly, understanding dawned on him.

"Ginger snap... are you... *jealous*?"

I scoffed. "What!? No..." I narrowed my eyes on him. "Do I need to be? I thought we agreed that you wouldn't be fucking anyone else while we're doing... whatever this is."

Cal threw his head back and released a deep, throaty laugh. The sound rolled over my skin like it was a living thing, and suddenly, the already sunny day felt just a little bit brighter.

"Hear that, Voxy? Ginger snap thinks we're fucking!"

Vox rolled his eyes, though he had a giant smirk on his face. He shook his head and dropped his butt, stomping it out under his combat boot.

"Vox is straight, baby. You don't have to worry about him."

Glancing back and forth between the two of them, I couldn't shake the possessive, jealous feeling that was still simmering in my chest.

"Yeah, well. *I* was straight, too, until I met you, asshole. You have a track record," I grumbled, and Cal swooped in, laughing and showering my face with kisses.

"You're so *fucking* cute when you're jealous."

I squirmed away from him and did my best to give him a grumpy look, but even I couldn't keep myself from smiling at the way his brown eyes were shining with delight.

I loved being the reason he smiled like that.

The thought hit me like a Mack truck, and in that moment, I realized I was well and truly fucked. This psychopath had officially wormed his way into my heart, and I was no longer sure if I could live without this nutcase ruining all of my plans.

Maybe he didn't ruin them at all.

Maybe he made them better.

Vox stepped forward and held out his hand to me. I stared at it and then realized after a moment that he wanted me to shake it.

I slid my hand into his and squeezed firmly, meeting his silver eyes dead on.

"Hey. I'm Ryan," I said. He just smirked and nodded, causing me to frown in confusion.

"Vox doesn't speak. But he already knows all about you."

Vox nodded and grinned at me. He winked and made a '*yapping*' motion with one of his hands right next to his head, indicating that Cal had talked his ear off about me.

I couldn't help but laugh. Okay, I guess he probably wasn't a butt whore if Cal had told him about me.

"I believe it. He's a chatty one." I grinned, looking back at my animated psycho.

Vox nodded in agreement and slid his hands into his pockets. He turned his gaze onto Cal, and his expression sombered. Jerking his head in the direction of the G-Wagon, the smile on Cal's face slipped a notch as well.

"We, uh, gotta head back out, baby. I just wanted to come by and say hi since it's been a few days."

Vox gave me a little wave, then sauntered back around the car, hopping into the driver's seat to wait for Cal.

Disappointment flooded my chest.

He was leaving again? Already?

I slipped my finger into his belt loop and tugged him into me. Wrapping his large hands around my hips, he dropped a happy little kiss on my forehead.

“How long are you going to be away this time?” I asked softly, my cheeks flushing slightly at how desperate I sounded.

God, I was so embarrassing.

Cal beamed down at me, clearly loving that the tables seemed to have turned, and I was now the one chasing him.

“I can’t be sure. I’m hoping soon, baby. Be patient with me. I promise I won’t stay away any longer than absolutely necessary. In case you haven’t noticed, I’m absolutely *obsessed* with you.”

I nodded, forcing down my protests, knowing he was doing his best and if he truly didn’t have to go, he wouldn’t.

“Okay. Just remember—no butt whores while you’re gone.”

He laughed in that open way he did, and I once again had that strange sensation that the whole world grew a little bit brighter.

“I promise, ginger snap. No butt whores.”

He kissed me one last time, and then he left me standing on the sidewalk, wondering when my life had been reduced to counting down the minutes until I could see him again.



Ryan Fairview

Naomi was in the garden with me, helping me snip some hydrangeas for an arrangement when my phone buzzed in my pocket. I pulled it out, not even bothering to hope it was Cal since I wasn't expecting to hear from him so soon after I had just seen him.

My heart leapt to my throat when I saw his name flashing up at me.

CAL SEX GOD WALKER:

Hey, ginger snap. I just wanted to let you know you probably won't hear from me for a few days. Everything is fine; I just won't have access to my phone.

My blood turned to ice in my veins. I felt like I had fucking whiplash.

He was just here! Why was he texting me now, telling me he was going to be MIA for a few days? Swallowing and taking a deep, grounding breath, I typed back a reply.

RYAN:

Why won't you have access to your phone? Can you call me?

CAL SEX GOD WALKER:

Not right now, baby. I have to deal with some stuff. I'll text you as soon as I can. Take care of Naomi for me while I'm gone. She gets lonely in that house by herself.

What the fuck? Why was he telling me to take care of his sister?!

RYAN:

What do you mean while you're gone? This is still just work stuff, right?

CAL SEX GOD WALKER:

Yeah. G2G. Talk soon <3

Something was fucking wrong. I didn't know how I knew. I just did. Biting my lip, I glanced up at Naomi, who was still happily snipping away the hydrangea bush. Should I tell her? Why did I feel like worrying her was a bad idea? I was feeling protective of her, like I needed to be the grown-up and keep her safe from all the bad things in the world, even though she was nineteen and technically an adult herself.

Glancing down at Cal's texts, I couldn't get a grip on the intense feelings of anxiety that were coursing through me.

RYAN:

Can you at least tell me how many days?

He didn't answer. He didn't even read it.

RYAN:

Cal?

Nothing. *Fuck.*

I walked away a few paces and hit the call button, suddenly desperate to hear his voice, but it went straight to voicemail.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck!

Why hadn't I gotten that Vox guy's fucking number?

"Ryan? What's up?" Naomi asked, clueing in that something was wrong.

I bit my lip and contemplated showing her Cal's messages but thought better of it. Maybe I was overreacting. Naomi said it was normal for him to

disappear for a few days at a time. At least he told me he wouldn't be available.

"Uh, nothing. Just your brother said he's going to be gone longer than expected. You wanna get your stuff and camp out here while he's gone? I hate the thought of you hanging out in that townhouse all by yourself."

Her eyes lit up in excitement. "Really? You wouldn't mind?"

I smiled at her, surprised at how enthused she was at the idea of hanging out with boring old me.

"Hell yeah. We love having you here."

She grinned and skipped over to me, throwing her arms around my waist in a big hug.

"I would love that, Ry-guy! I have plans with my friend Stephanie later today to watch the Twilight movies, but I can come over here after she leaves?"

I grinned at her and nodded. "For sure, I can drop you off and pick you up; just text me."

"Dope! Hey, while I'm staying here, can you teach me how to embalm a body?"

A surprised laugh burst out of me at her request. "That's going to be a *no*." I laughed despite the intense feelings of worry that were still churning in my gut. Much like her brother, Naomi had a way of making me come out of my shell and loosen up.

"Awh, man. How come?"

"If you want to be in the embalming room, I'm going to have to see a degree in mortuary science with your name on it." I smirked, and she pouted.

"Is that a challenge, Ry-guy? I'm highly competitive."

I shook my head, still chuckling. "Take it however you want, Gnomes. But for now, no dead bodies for you."

"*Fine*," she sighed, giving me a mischievous smirk. "You're lucky I'm a slut for flowers. I might even be better at making arrangements than you!"

I burst out laughing again.

A slut for flowers? Who said shit like that?

The Walker family, that's who. God, she was like a mini Cal.

She winked at me. "Told you I'm competitive."

I rolled my eyes, though I was smiling. "Yeah, sure Gnomes. Go pick up your sprigs. We need to get them in water ASAP so they don't go into

shock.”

I watched her bound away to collect the flowers she had cut and forced myself to take another deep breath.

Everything was fine. Cal would tell me if he was in danger... wouldn't he?

Knowing how he always took on the role of protector, I really didn't think he would. But it didn't matter. I had no idea where he was and had no way of finding him. The only thing I could do was hope that he really was alright and would come back as soon as he could.

Knowing this, however, didn't alleviate the deep, aching feeling of terror that was beating through my limbs.

Please be okay, Cal.

Naomi needs you.

Watching Naomi walk toward me with her arms full of hydrangeas, I realized that Naomi wasn't the only one who needed him. Not anymore.

Ugh. I was so fucked.

OceanofPDF.com

52



Cal Walker

Alexa, play: Eyes On Fire - Zeds Dead Remix - Blue Foundation,
Zeds Dead

I fucked up.
Zanetti was gone when we got back to the movie theater. I didn't know how that was fucking possible when we had been away for less than twenty minutes. How the fuck this man had disappeared into thin air in the middle of the day, I had no idea.

Vox was pissed.

Okay, maybe not pissed, but he was stressed. We were back in the Wagon, and he was running the algorithm we had planted on Zanetti's phone to see if we could find where he went.

The man's wife was even missing, which was either very good or very bad.

“Maybe they just bailed on the movie together,” I muttered half-heartedly, and Vox shot me a vicious glare.

“Yeah, yeah. I know.” I sighed. Dropping my head back against my seat, I groaned.

Fuck.

I shouldn’t have gone to see Ryan.

Damian was going to be so fucking pissed.

Suddenly, my phone buzzed.

Slipping it out of my pocket, I found a message from an encrypted, unknown number.

Flicking it open, my heart sank.

It was a picture of our mark who was *very* dead. He had a tattoo machine rammed in his eyes, with the words: *Too slow, got him!*

“Fuck,” I muttered, showing the phone to Vox. His face went white, and I cringed as he punched the steering wheel in anger.

He rounded on me, shoving a shaking finger in my face.

He didn’t need to speak for me to understand what he was saying.

This was all my fault.

“I’m sorry,” I muttered, feeling like shit. Vox punched the steering wheel again before dropping his head back and running his hands down his face in frustration.

Damian’s threats were running through my mind, and I knew that was why Vox was so angry with me.

Vox hadn’t received the same threats as me.

I was the lead, so I was the one that would need to suffer the consequences of this failure. So, it’s not that Vox was worried about having to suffer through recalibration. He was worried about *me* having to go through it.

I was all Vox had, and while he almost seemed to get off on making Damian angry enough to punish him, it was a very different story whenever Damian threatened *me*. I think after what happened with Gavin, Vox was terrified he might lose me too. So, I understood his rage was coming from a place of love, but it was making me feel really fucking guilty.

Why did I have to be so impulsive all the time?

I should have listened to Vox and waited to go see Ryan.

“I have to tell him. He’s just going to figure it out anyway,” I whispered, and Vox turned his head to look at me, his eyes full of angry tears.

He grabbed a handful of my T-shirt and yanked me across the center console into a tight hug. He shook his head while he held me, and I knew he was asking me not to text Damian.

“I have to, Voxy. He’ll kill them if I don’t. You know he will.”

He pulled away and leaned over me, digging through the glove compartment to pull out a pen and a pad of paper.

I raised my eyebrows, surprised that he was willing to go this far to communicate with me.

He scribbled on the pad, and I waited patiently for him to write whatever it was he wanted to say.

Finally, he showed me the note, his mouth set into a firm line.

*‘We can protect them. I’ll help you. I’m done with him,
Cal. Let’s run away. Let’s finish what Gavin started.’*

I swallowed and shook my head.

“You know we can’t kill him, Voxy,” I whispered. As much as I wanted to, I couldn’t kill Damian. He *owned* me. He was probably the only person in the world that I didn’t think I could kill. He had programmed me not to. There had been many times over the course of my life that I’d thought about it or wanted to, but I couldn’t. It was like my body froze, and my brain shut down whenever I tried.

On top of that, I had no idea if he had some sort of tripwire in place to trigger a hit on my family in the event of his death. Knowing him, he probably did.

So, even if I was able to kill him, I would need to spend the rest of my life looking over my shoulder, worrying that someone was going to shoot my sisters from the bushes.

And now I had even more to lose. I thought of Ryan, Iris, and even grumpy-ass Theo. I had forced my way into their lives without even thinking about how it might endanger them.

I couldn’t put them at risk like that. They deserved better.

An angry tear slid down Vox’s cheek, and he snatched up the pad again, scribbling another note.

'If he hurts you, I'll kill him my fucking self.'

I gave him a sad smile and brushed the tear off his cheek,

"No, you won't. I'll be fine. It's just a little recalibration. I've been through it before and survived just fine. Just... take care of my sisters and Ryan while I'm out of commission—Okay?"

Vox ran his hand down his face again in frustration. I watched him struggle with his anger and let him punch the steering wheel a few more times.

He just needed to get it out of his system.

Finally, he looked back at me, his mouth a firm line.

He nodded.

Giving him a grateful but sad smile, I pulled him in for another hug.

"Thanks Voxy. I love you."

He squeezed me tighter into him, and I pretended the way his shoulders were shaking wasn't breaking my fucking heart.

Finally, I untangled myself from him and let out a shaky sigh.

Time to answer for my goddamned sins.

CAL:

Hey. I fucked up. We lost the mark.

Damian's response was immediate.

DAMIAN:

Apex. Now.

OceanofPDF.com

53



Cal Walker

Walking into Damian's office felt even shittier than it usually did. Vox had insisted on coming with me despite the fact that I had begged him not to.

Nothing good would come of it.

We walked in to find Damian where he always was, sitting at his pristine desk, typing away with the two pictures of my sisters facing him.

He didn't look up as we entered, but he did speak.

"I didn't call for you, Mr. Moretti. Leave us," he drawled in a flat, bored tone.

Vox didn't move, and I nudged him urgently.

"Get out of here," I hissed, but he ignored me, his burning silver eyes locked on Damian.

Damian sighed and looked up, meeting Vox's gaze head-on.

"Leave now, Mr. Moretti. You're not doing Mr. Walker any favors."

Instead of leaving, Vox walked slowly toward Damian's desk. I fidgeted nervously as my friend placed both hands on the desk and leaned over it,

bringing his face so close to Damian's they could have kissed.

He stood like that for what felt like forever and just stared at him. Damian stared right back.

After a long moment of silence, Damian finally spoke.

"If you think this little act is going to make me take *you* downstairs instead of your friend, you are sorely mistaken, Mr. Moretti. Unless you want what happened to Mr. Willis to happen to Mr. Walker, I highly suggest you leave my office. Now."

A shocking mix of rage and fear shot through me at Damian's words. He had basically just confirmed Vox's suspicions that he had killed Gavin.

Vox lunged across the desk, but I snatched him around the waist and threw him back away from Damian.

"Get the fuck out of here, Vox!" I roared, shoving him toward the door. "I'm not fucking kidding!"

Vox wasn't listening. He was full-blown trying to fight me to get to Damian, who was watching us with an annoyed, bored expression on his face.

I grabbed a fistful of Vox's hair and put my mouth directly against his ear so Damian couldn't hear me.

"I need you to fucking get a grip and make sure nothing happens to Ryan or my sisters. You can't help me protect them if he fucking kills you. *Please*. Just go."

That seemed to do the trick. Vox shoved off me and gave Damian one last disgusted look before turning on his heel and leaving, slamming the door behind him.

"Such a temper on that boy," Damian drawled, and I rounded on him, seething with barely controlled rage.

"You said he died on a mission!" I snarled, taking a menacing step toward Ryker.

He didn't flinch. His face remained completely expressionless as I tried to get myself under control.

"Grow up, Callum. Of course I killed him. No one leaves Apex without my blessing. You think I didn't know what he was planning? You think I didn't know he was trying to take you away from me?"

Damian stalked toward me, his movements slow and unhurried. He was slightly shorter than me, but it didn't matter.

I was afraid of him.

The little boy inside me cringed and curled up into a ball in my chest.
Don't hurt me, don't hurt me, don't hurt me...

When he was inches away, he stopped, locking those whiskey eyes on me. I flinched as he raised a hand to gently stroke the side of my face.

"You're *mine*, Callum. You. Belong. To. Me. It's time I remind you of that."

Rage, terror, and self-hatred were warring within me. My fingers twitched at my side, aching to wrap around his throat and snap his fucking neck, but every time I tried to tell my arms to move, nothing happened.

It was like he had me hypnotized. I was working against years of conditioning and brainwashing. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't lift a hand against him, and I *hated* myself for it.

"I don't belong to you," I snarled, "I fucking *hate* you."

He cocked his head to the side, still stroking my face. I hadn't managed to step away like my mind was screaming at me to do.

"Who do you belong to then? Certainly not that new man you've been spending so much time with."

Dropping his hand away from my face, he pulled a tiny black remote out of his pocket and clicked a button. Suddenly, all the screens behind his desk were filled with images of Vox and me standing in front of Fairview Funerals.

My eyes widened in fear.

How had he gotten those pictures?

They weren't traffic surveillance photos, it looked like they had come from a fucking camera. Was he having me followed?

He pressed another button on his remote, and all the screens combined to show one large closeup of me kissing Ryan. Both of us looked deliriously happy with smiles on our faces despite the fact that our lips were touching.

"If you touch him, we're done," I growled, and Damian's eyes flashed, telling me I had just confirmed what he already suspected.

"If you want to keep your little toy alive, Callum, you know what you have to do."

The rage that was storming inside of me felt like it was literally smashing up against my internal organs. My face was hot, and my hands were shaking. All this anger and resentment had nowhere to go, no outlet. I had to stuff it deep down inside of me and take this punishment so I could keep the people I cared about safe.

After a long, tense moment, I managed to swallow everything down. The dead feeling I had been cultivating since I was a child rushed through me, putting out the burning flames of my hatred like water over a forest fire.

“Fine.” I nodded, and a smile curved across his lips.

“Good boy, Callum,” he purred and walked toward the door. He paused, glancing back at me, where I was still standing, staring at the black and white photo of Ryan and me kissing.

“Come, Callum,” he ordered, and my head snapped away from the screens. My body moved to do as Damian commanded. I followed him through the concrete hallways of Apex and down into the basement, with the image of Ryan’s smiling face burned into the fabric of my mind.

OceanofPDF.com

54



Vox Moretti

I knew that fucking bitch killed Gavin.
I fucking *knew* it.

And now he had fucking Cal in the basement doing god knows what to him. Not on my watch. I was *done* with Damian Ryker.

The only reason I hadn't fucking left Apex already was because I couldn't leave Cal behind. Damian had his claws so deep in my friend I didn't think he *could* even leave if he wanted to. I'd seen the way Cal tended to freeze up whenever Ryker issued an order. I knew Cal had gone through more conditioning than all of us combined. For some reason, Ryker had always been obsessed with Cal. More so than the rest of us.

If I was going to extract my friend from this shit hole, I was going to need to be smart about it, and I was going to have to make sure Cal's sisters and his new boyfriend were safe, or there would be no convincing him to leave with me.

My first order of business was figuring out how the fuck Ryker had been tracking us so easily. I always did my due diligence in checking our

vehicles for trackers, and I had both of our phones locked down. It would be impossible for Damian to put tracking software on either of our devices without me knowing about it.

But still, maybe I missed something?

As soon as I left Damian's office, I went straight for the garage and spent the next two hours dismantling the dashboard in Cal's G-Wagon, looking for any signs that Damian had tampered with it.

Coming up empty, I gave up on the G-Wagon and went back to my room to grab one of my handheld metal detectors. (Don't ask; they come in handy more often than you would think.)

I crossed the hall and picked the lock to Cal's room, kicking the door shut behind me as I walked in. There were cameras in all our rooms, and I gave Cal's the finger as I made my way to the steel rack that he used as a closet.

I didn't give a fuck if Damian knew what I was doing. If he came in here to try and stop me, I would blow his fucking head off.

My Beretta was burning a hole in my jeans as I passed Cal's desk and PC set up. He didn't have much in this room. Unlike me, he hadn't bothered putting anything on the walls or making it more homey.

This wasn't his real home; he just slept here so his nightmares didn't wake Naomi up. I heard them, though. He woke me up almost every night with his screams, not that I would ever communicate that to him. I was scared he would start sleeping in his car or something if he knew. He was annoyingly selfless like that. If he ever learned he was inconveniencing me in any way, he would immediately take action and do whatever was in his power to keep it from happening again.

He wouldn't understand that I just wanted him to be safe and close to me. I would take a thousand sleepless nights over Cal suffering a moment longer than necessary. He had been through fucking enough.

All of us had.

The one thing Cal *did* keep on his desk was a mason jar full of teeth that he collected from his child abuser kills. He didn't collect teeth from Damian's assignments. They only came from marks he picked for his hobby, so there weren't many. Maybe, like, ten of them.

I smirked at the jar as I passed it, resisting the urge to pick it up and shake it like some sort of macabre maraca.

I was annoyed at first when he picked up this hobby. It was enough of a pain in the ass trying to keep him alive and out of prison on Damian's assignments. As his partner, it was easier for me to keep an eye on him and make sure he didn't get too out of control.

But when he started going out on his own and murdering these ass fucks, it had stressed me the fuck out. Cal was an act first, think later kind of dude, and it was a full-time job keeping him from getting into trouble.

A job that I was more than happy to take on if it meant keeping him safe.

Cal was... everything for me. He was the closest thing I had to a family. He'd never cared that I didn't speak. He always made up what he thought I was saying, and he was... freakishly on point. It was like he could read my damn mind.

Outside of Gavin, he was the only person I had ever met who *got* me. I didn't have much. But I had Cal. And if I had to die in a blazing streak of glory protecting him, I would... because my life had no joy without him in it.

Since he'd found Ryan, he hadn't seemed as interested in his *hobby*, and I was grateful for that, but now everything was all fucked up.

I had a feeling Damian wasn't going to let Cal get away with keeping the small piece of happiness he clearly had found with Ryan.

It was only a matter of time before the bastard took Ryan away from Cal. That was why I had been so against visiting him while on the mission. I *knew* Damian would use it as an excuse to punish Cal and make a move to eliminate Ryan from Cal's life.

See, Damian was smart. He knew killing Ryan would just push Cal away.

Using him as a means to control Cal made much more sense. I wouldn't be surprised if by the time Cal came out of *recalibration*, Damian would have convinced him it would be safer for Ryan if Cal didn't see him anymore.

I knew how this fucker worked.

After all, that was how he controlled me.

'What would Callum do without you, Mr. Moretti? Surely, he wouldn't make it a day. If you left, it would be a shame, wouldn't it, if Mr. Walker needed to suffer through recalibration that was meant for you?'

God, I fucking *hated* him.

I reached for one of Cal's hoodies and yanked it off the hanger, clicking on my metal detector. Waving the wand over the black fabric, I grit my teeth in anger as the thing lit up like a fucking Christmas tree.

Mother fucker!

I threw the hoodie on Cal's bed and pulled out my switchblade, flicking it open and feeling along the hemline of the sweater where my wand had detected a piece of metal.

Sure enough, there was a tiny, hard lump sewn into the hemline. I cut open the stitching and fished out a tiny Bluetooth tracker.

Fuming with rage, I repeated the exercise with the rest of Cal's clothes. Literally, every hoodie, T-shirt, and pair of jeans had a tracker in it. I was surprised that the bitch hadn't done his socks too.

What a possessive little fucking *weirdo*.

Once I was done uncovering all the trackers, I stuffed them in my pocket and went back to my room.

I went through the same exercise with my clothes, feeling surprised that there were just as many sewn into my shit.

Damn, Damian. Didn't know you cared.

Shaking my head in disbelief, I pulled out an empty duffle from under my bed and started stuffing it full of tracker-free clothes and some of my favorite guns. I also added a few silencers and my laptop, just in case. Adding some of Cal's stuff, I slung the bag over my shoulder. Gathering up the trackers, I made my way to the mess hall.

There were some guys eating lunch, but I paid them no mind, stalking past them to the communal microwave.

Dumping the trackers in the microwave, I slammed the door shut and turned the bitch on high for five minutes before stalking away.

Maybe five minutes was overkill, but whatever.

I had a point to make.

The microwave started sparking and exploding as I walked out of the mess hall, pulling up my hood as I went.

"What the fuck, man!"

The guys eating were yelling after me. I ignored them and kept going, pulling out a cigarette as I walked.

Now that was taken care of, I needed to go make sure his sisters were on lockdown and teach Ryan how to use a fucking gun.

I would bet my left nut that the mortuary boy had no idea how to use a firearm, and if shit was going to hit the fan the way I felt like it was, he was going to need to learn fast.

I hated leaving Cal here, but he was right. This was Damian's turf. If I went and tried to extract him without a plan, we wouldn't make it out alive.

I sure as fuck wouldn't. Damian was pretty sick of my shit. He might finally cave and decide it would just be easier to kill me. I had been rebelling against him for years.

Entering the underground parking garage, I eyed my Aston Martin regretfully. It sucked leaving it behind, especially since I only got to enjoy using it for like a week. But whatever, the G-Wagon definitely made more sense if we were going to war.

Throwing the duffle in the back of Cal's car, I slipped his keys out of my pocket and hopped into the driver's seat. Next, I flicked on the monitors on the dash and loaded up the camera feed he had installed in Ryan's house.

Naomi had been staying there while Cal was out, and it would have made my life a lot easier if I only needed to hunt down Cass.

Frowning, I flipped through the feeds for each room, feeling a mix of annoyance and worry twist my gut as I realized Naomi wasn't there. Ryan was in his office doing paperwork, Theo was in her guest house, and Iris was in the garden... There was no Naomi, though.

Switching to the feeds at Cal's house, I let out a sigh of relief when I found her on the couch with one of her little friends, watching a movie.

Fucking Twilight too. Ugh.

Well, I would just need to collect her ass and bring her back to Ryan's. The funeral home was detached and would make a better base for a gun fight if it came to that. Less chance of casualties due to bullets passing through walls.

Before turning on the car, I flipped to the feeds in Cass's condo. She was home too, working away on some paperwork in the living room with a glass of wine.

Out of the two of them, Naomi would be the easiest to collect, so I would start with her.

Pulling out of Apex, I tensed, wondering if any of the guards had any orders to stop me, but nothing happened.

I smirked at them on my way by.

Later fuckers. I'll be back to kill your asses in a few days.

OceanofPDF.com

55



Vox Moretti

Alexa, play: Smells Like Teen Spirit - Witchz

I parked several blocks away from Cal's house and spun a silencer onto the muzzle of my Beretta. Tucking the gun into my hoodie, I hopped out of the car and slid my hands into my pockets.

I had a feeling that Damian had assigned someone to tail Cal and me. There was no way to be sure if he always had us under this much surveillance or if it had started when Cal had clearly become distracted by his new obsession with Ryan.

Either way, I wasn't taking any chances. Before I scooped Naomi, I was going to have to make sure anyone watching the house was eliminated.

Not that I didn't think Damian would figure out that I was using Fairview as a base, but I needed to make sure it was clear that I was not fucking around.

If anyone came near Cal's sisters, I would fucking kill them. The best way to get that message across when you don't speak is to pretty much just lead by example.

It's true what they say: *Actions speak louder than words*.

I was living proof of that.

That being said, I took my sweet ass time meticulously canvassing the neighborhood before entering Cal's house.

This is where Cal's and my methods vastly differed. I would stay out here for days if I needed to, making sure all my bases were covered before making a move.

Cal tended to get bored after an hour or two max and would just move right into the action. In his defense, sometimes he was right, and I was being a paranoid little bitch... but you didn't stay alive in this industry by making mistakes.

Maybe I was a little *overly* cautious and thorough, but I wasn't dead yet, so I must be doing something right.

My hard work paid off when it became apparent that the house across the street was vacant.

My assumption was the family was on vacation from how much the mail had piled up at the front door.

This house was tall and narrow, like a townhouse, but it was detached. There were little gravel-filled alleys between it and its neighboring homes. I crept around back and made sure there wasn't an alarm system that I would need to disable. Happily, there wasn't anything to indicate there was something more sophisticated than a locked door, so I slipped out my lock-picking kit and slipped inside.

It was quiet, and it felt like no one had been here in a few days, though I wasn't convinced.

Creeping deeper into the empty house, I kept my back covered in case my suspicions were correct and Damian had someone stationed here to watch Cal's house.

I quickly but thoroughly cleared the first floor and then set my sights on the stairs.

Holding my gun in a two-handed grip with the silencer pointed at the floor, I started to slowly side-step up the stairs, keeping my back to the wall as I went. It was *really* fucking quiet. Maybe I was wrong, and there was no one here...

Nope.

There was a shuffling sound upstairs. I tensed and tightened my grip on the gun as I slowly crept forward.

I tested each step carefully before putting my weight on it. The last thing I wanted was a creaky stair to be the reason I got busted.

It was slow going, but by the time I made it to the third floor, I knew for sure someone was upstairs. Peeking over the edge of the staircase, I surveyed the layout of the top floor before fully revealing myself.

The family who lived here had made this floor into a home office, and there was a man sitting in front of the far window with his back to the staircase.

He had a DSLR camera with a long zoom lens next to him, as well as a rifle with a scope. I narrowed my eyes.

What the fuck?

What was the rifle for?

My blood went cold when I realized it might very well be for me. I wouldn't put it past Damian to order my ass killed, especially after my little microwave explosion.

See? Better Safe than sorry.

I didn't bother alerting the man to my presence. He was small potatoes. Honestly, the fact that he set up with his back to the fucking staircase meant he deserved to die, in my opinion.

Careless.

I stalked up behind him, pointing my gun to the back of his head as I walked. Idiot didn't even notice I was there until I was basically on top of his ass.

Before he could turn around, I fired two rounds into his skull. It was messy but quiet, thanks to the silencer.

Blood and brains splattered all over the wall and the window, and I watched with satisfaction as Damian's man slumped forward, falling out of the chair and onto the ground.

Quickly and efficiently, I cleared the rest of the floor, making one hundred percent sure this guy had been working alone.

Once I was positive he didn't have a partner, I went to get the G-Wagon, pulling it up to the back of the house. I loaded it up with Buddy's rifle as well as his camera and his cell phone. The body? I left that for Damian to clean up.

Enjoy, bitch.

Then, I hopped into the wagon and parked it directly in front of Cal's house in case Naomi made my life difficult.

Sometimes the no-speaking thing was a pain in the ass. It would be a lot easier if I could just go in there and explain what the fuck was happening, but unfortunately, that wasn't the case.

Even if I wanted to speak, I wasn't sure I could anymore. My mouth didn't know how to make the words. Besides, I didn't *want* to speak. It was a spite thing.

I told my bitch ass mother I would never speak again, and I fucking meant it.

Fuck her, and fuck everyone who had a problem with me not talking.

So, Naomi would have to just deal.

I had keys to their many locks, and I made quick work of them before stepping inside.

"Cal!? Is that you?" I heard Naomi call from the living room. Obviously, I didn't answer. "Stephanie came over for a Twilight marathon! She just got back from Italy with her parents. You wanna watch with us?"

I rolled my eyes, snorting. Cal *would* probably watch Twilight with Naomi and eat up every second of it.

Loveable fucking goofball.

Ignoring Naomi, I made my way down the hall to where she was curled up in the living room with her friend.

"Cal?" she called again, though she jumped in surprise when she saw it was me. "Oh! It's *you*." Her tone immediately turned from excitement to disdain when she realized who it was that had just walked in. My lips twitched in amusement, but I just kept on my roll, heading for the stairs.

She was going to need clothes and shit.

"Hey! What are you doing going up there?" she called after me, but of course, I didn't respond.

"Who's that?" her friend whispered. Naomi scoffed so hard I could *hear* the eye roll in her voice.

"My brother's dickhead friend."

"He's *hot*!" her friend hissed, and I bit back another smile.

"*Ew*, Stephanie! He's, like, twenty-eight. He's basically a grandpa."

I snorted.

Fucking teenagers.

Busting into Naomi's room, I felt my lip twitch again at how inherently *Naomi* it was. The walls were white, but she had an accent wall with vibrant floral wallpaper. Her soft bed was covered in white and pink linens, and I brushed my fingers on the fluffy rose-print throw blanket she had tossed artfully across the foot of the bed. She reminded me of a little bumble bee, with her yellow hair and obsession with florals.

Her room even *smelled* like flowers. I inhaled and closed my eyes. Mmm. Like daisies and jasmine.

It was nice.

Frowning at the errant thought, I shook my head aggressively and turned to her closet.

Thinking about how good Cal's nineteen-year-old sister smelled was bad for so many fucking reasons.

I was just here to get her contained so I could keep all his favorite people out of trouble. That was *it*.

Ripping open the white slatted closet doors, I pulled out one of her pink suitcases. Making sure to grab the biggest size, I threw it on her bed and started emptying her drawers into it.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" I glanced over my shoulder to see Naomi standing in the doorway to her room with her hands on her hips.

I rolled my eyes.

What did it look like I was doing?

What a stupid question.

People didn't understand why I didn't speak, but I never understood why people needed to speak so much. Not every thought you had needed to be an outside fucking thought. Sometimes, you would seem like less of an idiot if you kept your mouth shut.

Pretending she didn't exist, I continued to fill her luggage with all her shit.

"Hey! I asked you a question, asshole! You can't just come in here and start going through all my stuff!"

I almost laughed out loud.

I absolutely *could* do that. I was *literally* doing that right now.

"What's going on up here?" Naomi's friend appeared in the doorway, and I swallowed back a growl. She needed to get the fuck out of here.

I rounded on them and pointed at her friend, then jerked my thumb in the direction of the stairs, indicating that I wanted her to leave.

Naomi crossed her arms over her firm but supple chest and glared at me. I forced myself to keep my gaze trained on her face and not glance down.

She was always wearing these cute little floral sundresses, and it was honestly fucking indecent. I don't know why Cal didn't make her cover the fuck up.

If she was *my* sister—I stopped that thought in its tracks and shook my head again. For some reason, it felt even more weird to think of Naomi as my sister. It made my stomach churn.

“You can't order my friend to leave, Vox. This isn't even your house!”

I rolled my eyes again and pulled my Beretta out of the holster under my hoodie. Without breaking eye contact with Naomi, I pointed the gun directly at her friend's face. The girl screamed and bolted, scampering down the stairs as fast as her feet would carry her.

Naomi's mouth dropped open, and I smirked at her, raising an eyebrow.

Your move, bumble bee.

“What the FUCK IS WRONG WITH YOU!” she screeched and threw herself at me. A silent chuckle bubbled up in my throat as she pounded her tiny fists into my chest. I allowed her to continue her adorable little attack while I stepped backward, laying my gun on her dresser.

With my hands now free, I wrapped my fingers around her upper arms, pushing her away from me as she continued to hit and kick at me, spitting and hissing like a feral cat.

I waited a few moments for her to calm down, but the longer I held her, the more angry she seemed to become.

“You fucking *psycho vampire*! You can't come in here and point a gun at my friend! Wait until I tell Cal about this! You're a fucking nutcase! Who do you think you are?”

And on and on and on she went.

After a few more minutes, I finally got sick of her shit and spun her around before slamming her back into me.

You want a vampire, little bee? I'll give you a vampire.

I sank my teeth into the crook of her neck, biting down hard enough on her soft flesh that she squeaked in surprise.

She froze, then kind of went... limp, like a kitten that had just been grabbed by the scruff of her neck.

“What—Vox...” she murmured, clearly completely shocked that I had bitten her. I simply chomped down harder, and she let out a soft moan that made my dick twitch in a way I didn’t want to analyze too closely.

After another moment passed, and I was sure she wasn’t going to try to attack me again, I released her. Looking down at my teeth marks on her neck, my dick did that illicit twitch thing again. It took more effort than I cared to admit not to drop a little kiss on the mark I had left on her skin.

Stepping back, I allowed her to turn around. She stared at me with a strange look on her face and touched a hand to her neck with trembling fingers. Her cheeks were pink, and I couldn’t stop myself from staring at the way she stroked the tender spot.

“Why are you here? Why are you packing my clothes up?”

I gave her a look that said: *why the fuck do you think?*

She bit her lip and glanced at her suitcase, then back at me again.

“Is Cal in trouble?” she whispered, and I nodded once.

“Where are you taking me?”

I rolled my eyes. The answer to that was *wherever I thought was fucking best*.

For now, it was Ryan’s, but that might change if I decided it was no longer safe.

She would find out soon enough.

Snatching my gun up off the dresser, I used it to point to her closet, indicating that I wanted her to start packing or I would need to continue to do it for her.

She nodded and sighed. “Yeah, okay, fine. You owe Stephanie an apology, though. That was fucked up, Vox.”

I smirked at her and shrugged.

Next time, listen to me, little bee.

She rolled her eyes and stuck her tongue out. Heat coursed through my veins at her tiny show of defiance, and I suddenly wanted to bite down on that pink tongue the way I just bit down on her neck.

Ugh. If Cal and I survived this shit with Damian, he would probably end up killing me anyway for creeping on his little sister.

Needing to get away from Naomi before I forgot why I was here and did something even more inappropriate, I stalked out of her room to get her

gnome-shaped Squishmallow and anything else I thought she might want while staying at Ryan's.

Once I had her situated, I could keep an eye on everyone from the car, and she wouldn't be able to distract me with her skimpy sundresses and stupid daisy clips.

Then, I could start the real work of saving my friend.

OceanofPDF.com

56



Cal Walker

Alexa, play: Deep End - Vanthe, Awon, Melrose Avenue

“This way, Mr. Walker.”

I followed Damian into a room I hadn't seen in years. It was damp and rectangular in shape. A green moss had begun to grow in a thin, slimy film on the walls. There was a large steel bathtub in the center of the floor, though I knew from experience the faucets weren't attached to anything. The water came from the hoses fastened to various spigots around the perimeter of the room.

The tub was bolted to the ground, and chains that ended with manacles were fastened to the feet of the basin.

McGreggor stood next to the tub in full Kevlar, holding an AK-47.

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. If it came down to me and McGregor in a fight, I would win. The only reason I was going along with

this at all was to appease fucking Damian enough that he wouldn't go after Ryan.

The extra muscle was unnecessary.

"Undress," Ryker ordered, and I didn't hesitate. I unzipped my hoodie and discarded it before undoing my jeans.

Stepping out of my boxers, I turned to Damian, raising an eyebrow. I knew what came next, but he wanted to order me to do it. It took the fun out of it if I did it before he had a chance to lord his power over me.

"Into the tub, Callum," he drawled, and I tongued my lip ring in agitation.

This was gonna fucking suck.

Climbing into the rusty, cold basin, I leaned back against the end without a faucet and held my wrists up. McGregor came forward and fastened the manacles to my arms, and I sneered at him while he chained me up.

"My eyes are up here, McGreggs," I taunted him, and his face went red with fury, which gave me a small pulse of satisfaction.

"We'll see how witty you're feeling after a few days of fucking torture, asshole."

I shrugged and leaned my head back against the tub, closing my eyes like I was settling into a nice long day at the spa.

"Do your worst, McGreggs. Show me what you got."

"Enough. Both of you," Damian snapped, and I peeked at him out from under my eyelashes, tugging slightly on my newly chained arms to see how much give I had.

Not fucking much.

Boo.

Maybe McGreggs wasn't as much of a dumbass as I originally gave him credit for. I hated it when the plebs proved me wrong.

Womp womp.

"So what are we starting with?" I drawled, feigning interest. "Waterboarding? Shock therapy? Fingernail removal? What's on the agenda?"

"Callum. I. Said. *Enough*," Ryker warned, and I let out an annoyed huff.

Opening my eyes, I watched him bend down to pick up one of the hoses, turning on the spigot.

My skin turned to gooseflesh. I knew it was going to be cold as fuck. It was already pretty chilly in here; getting soaked with freezing water was going to be hella uncomfortable.

"Spray him down," Damian said, handing the hose to McGregor, who gave me a sadistic smirk.

"Gladly." He grinned, cranking the nozzle on the hose to what I was sure was fucking pressure washer levels of intensity before blasting me directly in the chest with it.

I tensed and grit my teeth against the freezing spray as he leisurely cut the water stream across my naked body. He intentionally passed it over my dick, and I snarled at him, jerking at the rusty chains that prevented me from attacking his bitch ass for being such a cunt.

"Enough," Ryker ordered, and the water immediately stopped. I was unable to keep myself from shivering. My teeth chattered without my permission as I glanced over at Ryker, who was fiddling with what looked like a Bluetooth speaker and my phone.

"Now, let's see what you have on your most played list, Callum," Damian drawled, and I frowned.

What was this asshole doing?

He used my face to unlock my phone and connected it to the speaker before turning on one of my favorite dubstep playlists. He made a face, shaking his head in disappointment.

"You have such terrible taste in music," he drawled, and I shrugged.

"Don't listen to it, then."

"Oh no, Callum. We're going to listen to it together every day. When your music plays, you'll know it's time for a session."

I narrowed my eyes on him.

What was he up to?

"Then when we're done here, every time you listen to your shitty music, you'll remember who you belong to and the lessons you're going to learn right here, in this room."

"Jesus Christ, Damian. You really are a fucking prick," I growled through chattering teeth. I was fucking freezing and already so uncomfortable that the dubstep was grating on my nerves more than soothing me like it normally did.

The echo of the music ringing through the concrete room wasn't helping either.

“We’ll also use it to make sure you don’t get too much sleep.”

“Perfect. Can’t wait,” I snapped, and McGregor slipped out of the room as Damian perched on the edge of the tub.

I glared at him as he reached forward and stroked the side of my face, looking at me with an expression that was almost tender.

“I’m doing this for your own good, Callum. I know it doesn’t feel like it right now, but you’ll thank me for this later.”

I highly fucking doubt that, ass wipe.

McGreggor reappeared, but now, instead of the gun, he was holding a long black stick with two prongs on the end.

I knew exactly what it was the second I laid eyes on it.

Mother fucker.

This was why he hosed me down. That was an electric cattle prod.

It would have sucked on its own, but wet, I was going to feel that shit through my entire body.

“Now. Let’s begin. Who is it you belong to, Callum?”

I eyed McGregor warily as he circled the basin, settling on the opposite side of Damian. Sighing, I closed my eyes and dropped my head back against the tub, imagining the way Ryan’s cheeks had flushed the night before when he asked me to stay over.

“You. I belong to you, Damian,” I lied, only to immediately scream as the cattle prod was rammed into my ribcage. The shock tore through my entire body, rattling my teeth and my bones so hard I could barely think.

The pain felt like it lasted forever, but it likely barely lasted a few seconds.

I was panting and groaning by the time McGregor pulled back, and I jerked away from Damian’s hand as he ran his fingers through my hair, making soothing sounds in the back of his throat.

“Hmm. I don’t think you believe that, Callum. Not yet. But don’t worry. We’ll get there.” He hummed, and he turned the volume on my phone up, cranking the dubstep louder.

“Again. Who do you belong to?”

“You,” I whispered, this time bracing for the shock before it came, though it didn’t do much to alleviate the agonizing pain that tore through me.

I thrashed in the tub so violently that my chains rattled. McGregor held the fucking thing into me for an unreasonably long time while I seized.

Damian raked his fingers through my hair over and over again for the duration of the shock, whispering fucked up words of comfort and praise to me like he wasn't the reason this was happening to me in the first place.

"Hose him down again," Damian ordered after McGregor removed the prodder from my skin. I was gasping for breath when the cold stream of water hit me directly in the face. I choked and sputtered on it and was mid-cough when they hit me with the cattle prodder again.

My brain went blank, and I couldn't think. I was pretty sure I was screaming, but I couldn't be sure what was my voice, what was the music, and what was my imagination.

Over and over again, they alternated between the hose and the electricity, all while the pounding base of my '*most listened to*' playlist echoed around me, competing with my screams of agony.

I tried to think of Ryan, Vox, Naomi, and Cass, but after enough time, I couldn't really think of anything.

Everything hurt, and I just wanted it to end.

I could do this. I could do this.

I had done it before, and I would do it again.

I just needed to convince Damian that I truly believed I belonged to him, and this would all stop.

I just didn't know how to do that.

Not when I was starting to believe that I belonged to someone else entirely, and I think the devil with the whiskey eyes fucking knew it.



Ryan Fairview

I was wrapping up some paperwork from Mr. Renfrew's funeral when I got a text from Naomi.

NAOMI:

Hi Ry-guy, change of plans. I think I'm coming over earlier than I expected.

RYAN:

No problem. What time should I expect you? Do you still need a ride?

NAOMI:

Not exactly...

There was a soft knock on my office door, and I glanced up to see Naomi, Cassandra, and Cal's friend Vox standing in the hallway.

My eyebrows raised in surprise.

"What—What's going on?"

The look on Vox's face made my heart skip a beat in my chest. I leapt up from my seat.

"Where's Cal?" I asked the bleach-blond mercenary.

He poked Naomi in the side, and she glared at him but turned back to face me.

"Vox says Cal's in trouble. I think he wants Cass and me to stay here with you guys so we're all in one place while he figures out how to help him."

I glanced at Cass, who was looking predictably pissed off and annoyed. She had a massive Louis Vuitton suitcase with her and the Chanel bag she had been carrying the last time I saw her.

"You better have decent wi-fi in this place if I'm expected to stay here," she snapped, looking around like she was inspecting the building for mold. "I have a conference call in an hour."

Ignoring Cass, I turned back to Vox, who was looking increasingly agitated and impatient.

I couldn't get past the part where Cal might be in danger.

Having communicated with spirits that had their mouths or vocal cords removed from whatever trauma had brought about their deaths, I knew how to speak to Vox in a way that would get me answers. The trick was to ask questions that only had yes or no responses.

"Is what Naomi just said true?" I asked, meeting Vox's silver gaze.

He raised an eyebrow but nodded.

"Has whoever you two were hunting hurt him?"

Vox shook his head, and my gut soured.

"Is it that Damian guy?"

Vox nodded, and rage ignited through me at the thought of that fucking man hurting Cal more than I suspected he already had.

"Do you need help?" I asked immediately. I didn't know what I could do, but I knew I wasn't about to just sit around and do nothing. My entire body was humming with anxiety, and I felt sick to my stomach.

What was that man doing to Cal? This is why he told me he couldn't text me; he was in trouble with this man. I was suddenly so angry and scared for him. Nothing about this felt fair.

Vox rocked his head back and forth before beckoning for me to follow him. I didn't hesitate.

“Go put your suitcase upstairs, Gnomes. Iris is in the kitchen,” I muttered to Naomi on my way by, but she shook her head stubbornly.

“Nuh-uh. I want to help, too!”

Vox scoffed, and I shook my head just as Cass exclaimed, “Absolutely not!”

“No, Naomi. Cal will never forgive me if I let anything happen to you. Please go unpack and see if Iris needs any help with dinner. You can take the room at the end of the hall.”

“I’m not a little kid, you know. I’m almost twenty!” she snapped, and I pinched the bridge of my nose.

“It’s not about being a little kid, Naomi.” I sighed, thinking about the way Cal had looked at me when I asked him what his key tattoo represented.

‘It’s Naomi’s key.’

Naomi’s well-being will always be one of Cal’s top priorities. He had spent his entire life doing everything he could to keep her safe. I wasn’t about to let her get involved with something that might jeopardize that.

“What’s going on?” I turned to find Theo sauntering down the hall, her dark eyes flickering back and forth between me and Vox, before finally landing on Cass. The second she took in Cass’s irritated stance, a mischievous look twinkled in her dark eyes.

Cass stiffened, looking like she was literally preparing to battle my sister, but Theo completely ignored her and turned to Vox.

“Who’s this guy?” Theo asked me, a sly smirk perched on her lips.

“This is Vox. He’s friends with Cal.”

“Oh. Hey, man. I’m Theo,” my sister said, holding out a hand to Vox, who still looked annoyed and impatient but shook her hand anyway.

“What’s the twerp doing here? You moving in?” Theo asked, taking in Naomi’s large pink suitcase.

“Temporarily. Cal’s in trouble. I think Vox wants us all in the same place while he investigates,” I explained, feeling impatient myself. I wanted to go get Cal *now*. I could barely keep still.

He needed me. I could feel it in my fucking bones.

Theo’s eyebrows shot up into her hairline.

“Is that so? Is that why Princess Cassandra is here, too?” Theo turned those taunting dark eyes on Cal’s sister. “Is the damsel in distress?”

“You want to see distress? I’ll put *you in fucking distress!*” Cass snarled, taking a step closer to Theo, who just smirked and leaned against the wall, looking Cass up and down like she might eat her alive.

“Now, now, is that any way to threaten your future bunkmate?”

“What are you talking about!?” Cass rounded on me. “What is she talking about?”

I took an unintentional step back. Fuck, she was scary...

Theo barked out a laugh. “I’m *talking* about the fact that if Naomi is taking the spare room upstairs, then the only other room is in the guest house... with *me*.” Theo smirked at Cassandra, clearly living for the lawyer’s inevitable explosion.

“Fuck this, I’m getting a hotel,” Cass snapped, turning on her heel. Vox grabbed her arm and tossed her back down the hall, right into Theo’s chest.

Theo steadied Cass as she teetered on her heels with a chuckle, and I thought for a minute that Cass was going to slap her right across the face. The only problem was Theo looked like she wanted her to do it.

Fuck having all of us under the same roof was going to be a shit show.

“That defeats the purpose, Cass. If it was safe to separate, you could have just stayed in your condo. Vox thinks we need to stick together. Apparently, we’re in danger,” Naomi pointed out, and I had to agree.

“Not to interrupt,” I snapped, “but can someone explain *why* we’re in danger? Where the fuck is Cal?” I couldn’t even pretend to be keeping my cool. “I’m freaking the fuck out. I need to know where he is, please,” I said, turning to Vox.

Vox gave me a sympathetic look and sighed. He made a writing motion on his palm and glanced at my desk expectantly. I rushed to get him a pen and paper.

Vox scribbled out a few words and passed the note back to me.

‘Damian is pissed that Cal has been distracted lately.’

Vox gave me a pointed look, and I felt my face go white. I knew what he was implying. *I was what had been distracting Cal lately.* My fingers began to shake.

“So he’s in trouble? Is he going to be ok?” I rasped, and Vox nodded, though his expression was grave. He snatched the paper back from me and

wrote another note.

'Damian won't kill him. But he's being 'punished.'

I narrowed my eyes. "What the fuck does that mean!? *Punished*? Like, he's hurting him?"

Vox gave me a very serious nod, and both Cass and Naomi looked furious.

"I'll fucking kill that twat waffle!" Cassandra screeched, moving to storm away again. Vox stepped forward to block her, but Theo got to her first.

"You're not going anywhere, princess," Theo grunted, wrapping her arms around Cassandra's waist and dragging her back.

"Let go of me, you fucking ogre! That dickhole has my brother!"

"Yeah, and he's going to get you, too, if you go storming over there without a plan." Theo snapped, not letting up an inch.

Cass whirled around to face my sister. She was so pissed that I was shocked literal smoke wasn't billowing out her ears.

"Yeah? And what do you suggest we do? Just sit here and do nothing?"

Theo chuckled and shook her head, gesturing to Vox.

"Seems like Dracula over there has a plan. Maybe we listen to him."

Vox rolled his eyes and wrote on his sheet of paper again.

'Who here can use a gun?'

Everyone raised their hand but me. Even fucking little Naomi.

I gaped at Theo.

"How do you know how to use a gun!?"

"How do you *not*!? What if we got robbed? What the fuck Ryan?"

"We're not going to get *robbed*!"

"You don't know that! This is a business! Businesses get robbed all the time."

Vox stepped between me and my sister and pulled a handgun out of nowhere. He handed it butt first to Theo, who took it from him without even blinking.

I watched in awe as she pulled back the metal thingy on top to check it for... I don't know... bullets, I guess?

Vox pointed to Theo and then to Cass and made a sweeping gesture toward her luggage.

Theo smirked and turned to Cass, pointing the handgun at the ground.

"Guess I'm your knight in shining armor, princess."

Cass glowered at Theo, her lip curling in disdain. To my complete shock, she reached into her Chanel bag and pulled out a handgun of her own, though hers was notably smaller.

"In your dreams, Muscle Shirt. I slay my own dragons. I don't need you to protect me."

I glanced at Naomi and raised an eyebrow.

"You going to whip out a gun, too, Gnomes?" I mumbled, and she sighed, shaking her head.

"Nah. I keep mine at the range."

My mouth dropped open, and she snickered.

"Cal's been taking me for years. You know, just in case."

"For fuck's sake..." I groaned.

Vox pointed to Naomi's suitcase, then gestured over his head to where the bedrooms were. He was clearly telling everyone to get settled in.

"Fine. You're so bossy." Naomi sniffed, grabbing her big pink suitcase and rolling it down the hall.

Cass snorted, then turned to Theo. "I guess you might as well show me where I'm staying." She gave my sister a critical up and down. "Better not smell like a fucking gym."

Theo just smirked and grabbed Cass's massive Louis Vuitton bag, heading toward the kitchen.

"Let's go, princess. I'll need your help moving all the free weights out of your room."

"Is that a fucking joke?" Cass snarled, though she at least was following Theo.

Once we were alone, Vox gestured for me to follow him, but I shook my head.

"Wait, tell me where we're going first. Are we going to get Cal?"

Vox gave me a pitying look and shook his head. He leaned over the desk to write me another note.

'Gun range. You need to learn how to shoot.'

The words seemed to burn on the page before me as the reality of the situation sank in. I had never had any interest in learning how to shoot a fucking gun, but in that moment, knowing that some faceless villain had my psycho and was *hurting* him... I suddenly wanted to know how to shoot a gun *really* fucking badly.

I crumbled Vox's note in my hand and gave him a nod. Something close to respect twinkled in his silver eyes, and he jerked his head toward the door, indicating that he wanted me to follow him.

Cal's bright, smiling face swam across my vision, and my throat felt tight at the thought that he was somewhere hurting right now, and I had no way of going to him.

OceanofPDF.com

58



Cal Walker

I forgot how weird time behaves during recalibration. It was impossible to tell if I had been chained down here for hours or days. I was beginning to suspect days after the seventh time I nodded off, only to be blasted back into consciousness by excessively loud dubstep.

Damian made sure I was given water to drink, but I wasn't permitted food for way longer than my body could handle.

After an undetermined amount of time, I was so weak from hunger, exhaustion, and relentless torture that I couldn't even make fun of McGreggor anymore.

You win this round, asshat.

I fought for as long as I could, but submission was inevitable. It always was. Damian was a master at psychological conditioning.

At first, he would punish me no matter what I said or did, so when he started rewarding me for saying the right thing, it hit that much harder.

I started to crave his praise, and the best way to do that was to convince him that I believed whatever it was he was forcing me to say.

The focus of most of my sessions was Ryan.

Apparently, Ryan texted my phone constantly. Damian never let me see the messages, but every time the dubstep started up, and Damian walked in with McGregor, I found myself praying Ryan hadn't sent me any new texts.

He always had, though.

The entire time I was chained in that tub, not a single session passed where Ryan hadn't left me a new message.

It was making it difficult for me to convince Damian that Ryan wasn't someone I cared about, and I was punished relentlessly for it.

It made me resent Ryan, which was exactly what Damian wanted.

"Callum, it's inappropriate, you know. For you to have led this man on to this point. You know better."

"He's nothing. Just a good lay," I croaked, despite the fact that I knew that wasn't true. Damian brushed my hair back out of my eyes, looking at me with an expression that meant I might have finally said something right.

"Correct, Callum. He is *nothing*. When I allow you to leave here, what are you going to do to prove that to me?"

I swallowed, shivering in the cold tub.

To prevent me from getting hypothermia, Damian covered me with a blanket in between sessions. But whenever he and McGregor were in the room with me, the blanket was removed.

"I'll tell him we're done," I promised, closing my eyes and forcing myself not to jerk away from Damian's relentless stroking. "I won't see him anymore."

Damian was being gentle, but it didn't matter. I was so raw and tired that even the lightest touches hurt.

"Such a good boy, Callum. You know I'm doing this to help you, right? You have always needed a little extra help focusing. You've been doing so well though, I'm very pleased with your progress."

My head was heavy, and my thoughts were sluggish. It wasn't possible for me to think straight when I was this sleep-deprived and hungry.

I nodded. "I know, Damian." I sighed, sinking further back into the tub.

"Tell me you love me, Callum," he crooned, and I winced.

"I love you."

The cruel smile that curled on Damian's face made me feel off balance. The days of torture and sleep deprivation meant I wasn't as mentally strong

as I normally was, and even though I knew I didn't love him, I still found myself waiting for him to say it back.

When he didn't, the small, broken child that my mother had tried to kill all those years ago seemed to take over my brain. Without my permission, the child version of myself used my voice to ask Damian something I hadn't ever been able to ask anyone since the day my own mother had told me she didn't love me.

"Do you... do you love me, too?" I whispered, desperate to hear someone say it back to me. Even if it was just one time from a man I fucking hated.

Damian's eyebrows raised in surprise, and McGregor snickered in the corner. Stroking my face gently, Ryker shook his head, looking at me with something close to pity on his face.

"How could I ever love you, Callum? All you ever do is disobey."

Tears filled my eyes, and I nodded, trying to ignore the fact that my heart felt like it was breaking, even though I knew deep down that Damian Ryker wasn't *capable* of loving anyone. Especially not the people he saw as possessions.

As an adult, I knew this. However, there was a time when I was a child that I really did think I loved him, and I believed he loved me back. He was always so proud of me when I followed his orders, and he used to take me to all the shit that I imagined parents did with their kids.

When I was eighteen, he bought me tickets to Tomorrowland and flew me out to Belgium so I could see all my favorite DJs live.

It was a core memory for me, and sometimes, these bright spots outshone the pockets of abuse he forced me to endure.

I *knew* this was abuse. But it sometimes got so mixed up with all the amazing things Damian had done for me that it was hard for me to truly hate him.

I owed so much to him, and even though he hurt me, I couldn't deny that I was grateful for the life he had allowed me to live.

He'd given me what I needed to keep my sisters safe. We never wanted for anything because of him. Maybe he was right, and I was being ungrateful for wanting more than this.

I certainly felt selfish for pulling Ryan into this life. It would be kinder to let him go. For a split second, I imagined how I would feel if Damian put

Ryan in this tub instead of me, and a shock of fear bolted through my frazzled mind.

No, no. I couldn't let that happen to him. I needed to stop being such a baby and let him go. Being around me was only going to get him hurt.

"Do you think you've learned your lesson, Callum?" Damian asked, watching me carefully from where he was perched on the edge of the tub.

I nodded. "Yes, Damian."

"Good. Now, I just want to make sure you have a little reminder of who you belong to so you don't forget again."

I could barely hear what he was saying anymore; sleep was pressing insistently against the corners of my mind, dragging me under.

I just nodded because he liked it when I agreed with him.

"After this, you can rest, I need you to be strong for me, Callum. Can you do that?"

I nodded again despite the warning bells that were blaring in my head.

My eyes fluttered, and I tried to focus as a burning scent filled the room. McGreggor was approaching, and he was holding a long stick again.

Was that the cattle prod? It looked different...

Damian circled around the tub and put me in a loose headlock, pressing his mouth against my ear.

Instinct had me tensing. I didn't know what was about to happen, but I knew it was going to fucking hurt.

"Take a deep breath for me, Callum," Damian whispered.

"What are you —"

"Right here, on his chest," Damian said, stroking his fingers directly over my heart.

My eyes widened as McGreggor lifted the long stick, and I saw that the end was bright red.

It was a brand.

The letters DR were so red hot they were smoking, and I could barely get a scream out before McGreggor pressed it into my chest, right where Damian had ordered him to brand me.

My screams competed with the dubstep, and I thrashed briefly as my nose filled with the scent of burnt flesh.

My burnt flesh.

That was the last thought I had before everything went black.

OceanofPDF.com

59



Vox Moretti

I was surrounded by fucking *idiots*.

Keeping Ryan and Cal's sisters all in one place was a full-time fucking job. So much so that I barely had a chance to get to my *real* work... which was figuring out how I was going to take down Apex the second I had Cal back by my side.

However, Cassandra, Naomi, and Ryan thought they knew better than me and were constantly trying to convince me to break into Apex to save Cal. When they weren't up my ass demanding why I wasn't doing anything to get him back, they were attempting to sneak out to do it on their own.

Which was fucking ridiculous.

Cassandra, predictably, was the worst for this. She was constantly trying to rebel against my one rule, which really wasn't fucking complicated.

The rule was: no one left Fairview without me. I thought it was pretty obvious that this rule was in place for their own goddamn safety.

Apparently not.

The only person who appeared to truly be on my side was Theo, but it definitely wasn't due to some misguided sense of loyalty to me. She just seemed to be enjoying her self-assigned role as Cassandra's bodyguard. Throughout the course of a week, the two of them had gotten into multiple screaming matches over Cass trying to escape to go hunt down her brother.

Well, Cass was the only one screaming. Theo was usually just quietly manhandling her back into the guest house with an amused smirk on her face.

Naomi was just as bad, if not worse.

Worse, because, unlike Cass, she wasn't trying to go on a rescue mission alone. She was trying to recruit Ryan to help her.

I was constantly catching the two of them conspiring to escape my watchful eye, which was impossible considering the fact that Cal had installed cameras in the entire house, and I knew where they were and what they were doing at all times.

Neither of them knew about the cameras; thank fuck. It gave me a much-needed edge since keeping the three of them under control was a non-stop pain in my ass.

Ryan had shut down his business temporarily, which was both a blessing and a curse.

It was a blessing because it made it possible for me to booby-trap the entire perimeter of his house without worrying about accidentally icing random civilians.

It was a curse because now he had nothing better to do than plot misguided rescue attempts with a nineteen-year-old who had zero combat training.

When Cal was out of recalibration, he was going to owe me another damn car for dealing with this shit... which he could definitely afford since I moved all his money out of his Apex accounts into my own off-shore accounts. I opened these accounts years ago for this exact reason when Gavin first planted the idea of rebellion in my head. I was glad I had because we were going to need all the money we could get our hands on.

It was one of the few things I had actually managed to get done while babysitting these morons for the last week.

Ryan hadn't let me sleep in the G-Wagon like I originally planned, so I was set up in his living room with my laptop and several monitors I had purchased to make my life easier.

I was *supposed* to be digging into the dark web and finding any contracts Damian had out on Cal's family.

If I was going to kill him, I would need to make sure any hits he had set up to launch in the event of his death were uncovered and dealt with.

The good thing about dealing with mercenaries was most of us were pretty monetarily motivated. Loyalty was bought. Very few of us were committed to our employers outside of a paycheck. So, if I could find the contracts Damian had out as a security measure, all I had to do was promise more money *not* to take the hit.

The only issue was it was like finding a needle in a proverbial haystack, and it would take me some time to unearth all the offers he might have on the market.

However, I checked the camera feeds for what felt like the zillionth time that week to find Naomi and Ryan in the office with their heads together.

For fuck's sake.

Slamming my laptop shut, I stalked out of the living room and made my way back into the office.

Both of them looked up as I entered, and the look on Ryan's face told me he was at his wit's end.

I'd given him a Beretta and had been working on teaching him to use it at the gun range each morning, but it wasn't exactly a skill that came naturally to him. He still barely knew how to turn the safety on and off, so when he snatched the gun up off his desk and pointed it at me, I almost laughed out loud.

"Listen, Vox. I'm sorry, but I've had enough. Cal's been gone for *days*, and we're just sitting here doing fucking *nothing!*" He snarled. I glanced at the gun he had trained on me with shaking hands and then over at Naomi.

She crossed her arms over her chest and pegged me with one of her more stubborn looks.

"Yeah, Vox. We're going to get Cal. You can either come with us or stay out of our way."

Oh yeah?

In one smooth motion, I knocked Ryan's hand to the side and twisted his wrist, forcing him to drop the firearm. I caught it and flipped it so it was pointed at him.

His mouth fell open in shock, and his eyes widened at how quickly I had managed to disarm him.

I raised a condescending eyebrow.

You were fucking saying?

Ryan's entire face went red with a mix of rage and humiliation, but I just stared at him.

If he couldn't even get a drop on *me*, how did this guy think he was going to break into a fucking mercenary base and extract a prisoner?

Besides, Damian would let Cal out on his own soon enough. Recalibration usually lasted about a week, and we were six days in. He was probably already in recovery.

It sucked, and I knew he was hurting, but I couldn't break in there on my own and keep his people safe at the same time. Not without careful planning.

What they wanted to do was fucking suicide, and Cal wouldn't want me to pull him out of a temporary situation at the risk of leaving his people unguarded.

He had told me to protect these morons, so that was what I was going to do. When I had him back, we could take down Apex together, but for now, I needed to fucking plan and work on covering our goddamn bases in anticipation of his release.

I was fuming and completely at the end of my rope when my phone buzzed in my pocket. Shooting Naomi and Ryan a warning glare, I slid the device out to find there was a notification from one of the apps that handled the motion detectors I installed outside at the beginning of the week.

My eyes widened when I saw a red Aston Martin parked in front of the house.

My red Aston Martin.

My heart leapt to my throat just as a familiar tall, dark-haired man stepped out of the driver's seat. He looked directly at the camera, and rage curled deep in my gut at the dead look in his eyes.

Cal was back, and he looked like he'd been through hell.

I glanced up at Naomi and Ryan and held up both hands in a 'stay here' motion.

Ryan frowned. "What? What's happening? Was that Cal? Did he text you?"

Ignoring him, I repeated the 'stay here' motion and turned on my heel to go to my friend, shoving Ryan's gun into the waistband of my jeans.

I didn't think Ryan would listen to me; he never did. But fucking whatever. I had done my job and kept him alive up until this point. If he followed me, I wasn't going to stop him.

From the look on Cal's face, I had a feeling Ryan was going to get a fucking reality check, anyway.

OceanofPDF.com

60



Ryan Fairview

Alexa, play: Atlantis - Seafret

Ya right. Like I was fucking staying back. I knew whatever Vox had seen on his phone had something to do with Cal. My heart was literally hammering in my chest as I followed Vox out of the house.

Sure enough, as soon as I stepped out the front door, relief rushed through me as I drank in the familiar sight of Cal.

My Cal.

I was so shocked and excited to see him that I didn't notice when Vox stopped in his tracks on the porch.

Slamming into his back, I stumbled slightly before frowning up at him.

He was staring at Cal, who was looking right back with his mouth in a firm line.

"Cal!" I shouted over Vox's shoulder, expecting to see his face light up at the sight of me.

But it didn't; he didn't even glance in my direction.

My whole body went cold.

"Cal?" His name was a question this time. Now that the initial shock and excitement were wearing off, I took the time to look at him more closely.

Something was fucking wrong.

He had dark circles under his eyes, and he looked like he'd lost weight. He hadn't been gone long enough for him to look that much thinner, but sure enough, his cheekbones were sharper than they had been the last time I'd seen him.

"I'm assuming you have Naomi here?" Cal asked Vox, still refusing to look at me. His voice was rough and raw, like he had been screaming, and more anxiety coursed through me.

Vox nodded, and Cal slid his hands in his pockets.

"Go get her. Tell her it's time to go home."

I glanced back and forth between Vox and Cal, completely confused.

Vox gave him one slow head nod and went back into the house, leaving me out here alone with my clearly broken psycho.

"Cal... where have you been? Are you okay? Why don't you come inside?" I asked, snapping out of my dazed state of shock and rushing toward him.

Finally, he looked at me, and his expression stopped me in my tracks. I was barely a foot away, but it felt like we were standing on different planets.

His eyes were empty, completely devoid of any of the humor I was used to seeing on his face.

He looked so broken I suddenly felt like I might cry.

Which was stupid.

What did I have to cry about?

He was the one who was clearly hurt. I couldn't see any marks on him, but the stiff way he held himself made me suspect that he was in a great deal of pain.

"What happened to you?" I whispered. For a moment, I didn't think he was going to answer me. He just stared at me with that scary, dead look on his face, and I quivered with anxiety.

This was not my Cal. What happened to my happy-go-lucky psychopath?

“We’re done, Ryan.”

What?

Was this some kind of fucking joke?

I let out a shaky laugh that I think was actually a choked sob.

“Ha ha. That’s funny,” I chirped, stepping closer to him. He just eyed me warily, his face more serious than I had ever seen it. “Since when do you call me Ryan?”

“That’s your name.”

“Yeah, but... usually you call me ginger snap.”

Or *baby*.

He just stared at me with that empty look on his face.

“Cal... I don’t know what happened, but why don’t you come inside so we can talk about it?” I tried again, but he shook his head.

“That’s not a good idea.”

“Why not? Cal, what’s going on?” My voice was cracking. My heart felt like it was breaking in my chest.

What the fuck was happening right now?

“Go inside, Ryan.”

“No. Not without you. Did you get any of my messages? I’ve been so worried about you, Cal. Please just tell me what happened—”

“Are you fucking deaf?” he snapped, and I flinched. I literally *flinched*. He had never spoken to me like that before, and his dark eyes were burning with pain and anger. “I said we’re fucking done. Don’t text me again. Lose my number. This was a *mistake*.”

“A... a mistake?” I whispered, feeling like my whole world was falling apart.

“Yes. A mistake. *You* were a mistake. I should have known better than to get involved with you.”

“Cal...” My eyes were literally filled with tears now. I had no idea when my feelings for him had changed from irritation to something that I might have considered close to *love*, but they had. Somehow, I couldn’t imagine my life going back to what it had been before him. I couldn’t lose him.

“Go inside, Ryan. I don’t want you anymore,” he said, and a strange roaring started up in my ears at his words.

For a moment, all I could feel was anguish and pure devastation. He might as well have fucking shot me in the chest. It would have hurt less.

I don't want you...anymore.

It was the 'anymore' that rang through my head like a warning bell, signaling that everything was not as it seemed.

I examined his face and forced down the overwhelming feelings of heartache and pain, doing my best to think critically about what was happening.

He didn't want me 'anymore.' But he wanted me before. I know he did. He'd just been gone for a week, and Vox told me he had more or less been being tortured. I could tell that he'd been through something horrible just by looking at him. The way he was treating me was night and fucking day from the Cal I knew.

The only thing that had changed between the last time I saw him and now was the week he'd spent at the mercy of that horrible man.

One thing I knew about Cal was he always put the safety of the people he cared about before his own.

I remembered the way he kissed me before he'd disappeared. You couldn't fake that. That wasn't a fucking *mistake*.

Damian wanted him to leave me.

Cal was trying to protect me from him.

No.

Fucking unacceptable.

This wasn't Cal.

This was a product of whatever Damian had done to him.

"I don't believe you," I snapped, stepping into him and sliding my hand around the nape of his neck. I let him see everything I was feeling... All the feelings that I'd tried so hard to deny but had somehow developed regardless. I let him see and opened myself to them fully for the first time.

I wasn't running from this anymore, and I wasn't about to let him fucking run from this either.

"I'm in this, Cal. I don't know what fucking happened to you, but I refuse to let it break us before we even had a chance to get started."

He glared at me and tried to pull away, but I tightened my hold on his neck.

"You made me swear that I would be yours, remember? You literally held me down in that field and made me fucking promise."

His eyes flashed, and his lips pursed, but I knew he was listening.

“Well, that goes both ways. You’re mine too, and it’s too late for you to run away now.”

Without waiting for him to respond, I slammed my mouth into his, and his eyebrows shot up in shock.

Instant.

Fucking.

Fireworks.

The second our lips touched, it was like the earth stopped spinning. My entire body reacted to his touch like it always did, and lightning exploded through my veins.

I pressed up against him, desperate to get closer.

Even with my body zipped against his, I didn’t feel like we were close enough. I felt like I might *never* be close enough to him. I wanted to literally crawl inside him and set up camp or let him crawl inside of me. I wasn’t picky. As long as we were together, I didn’t fucking care who was inside of who.

I just *needed* him. And I knew he needed me, too.

For a split second, he softened, letting out the tiniest whimper that broke my already shattered heart. The way he reacted to the kiss—no matter how hard he was clearly fighting it—confirmed what I already knew.

He didn’t actually want to end this.

He didn’t think I was a mistake.

He was scared and hurt and trying to keep me safe in the only way he knew how.

For one shining moment, he let me kiss him. He quivered so slightly, and his hands twitched at his sides. I knew he wanted to wrap his arms around me and kiss me back.

Instead, he shoved me away roughly and growled in frustration, though there was a little bit of *something* in his gaze now. Those dead eyes softened just a bit.

He was still in there.

“Please... don’t make this harder than it needs to be, Ryan.” His voice was a guttural rasp. Like he was pleading with me to let him go.

“Yeah. Fuck *that*,” I hissed, stepping into him again. He backed away from me, almost cringing in a way that was so inherently *not* Cal that it made me sick. I frowned, realizing it seemed as if he were favoring the left side of his body.

He looked so unlike himself. So tired and sad and broken... like a scared, injured animal. I forced myself to back off and give him space. I didn't want to be the reason he felt stressed or cornered.

Making the conscious decision to give him some room to breathe, I did everything I could to calm my own panic at the sight of him nearly cowering before me.

I swallowed, ignoring how tight my throat felt. I needed to keep it together.

For him.

"Do what you need to do for now, Callum, but I'm not giving up on you. I'll be right fucking here, waiting for you to come back to me when you're ready," I promised.

"You'll be waiting a long time, then." He sighed, taking another step back toward his car.

"I'll wait for you forever if I have to, angel."

His mouth parted, and his eyes turned glassy.

"Angel?" he whispered just as Naomi's voice rang out behind me.

"Cal! You're back! Are you okay?" She cried, rushing down to meet us on the sidewalk. Cal pulled his dark gaze away from me, and he pinned his sister with the same dead look he had given me.

"Get in the car, Naomi."

She froze at his tone, glancing back and forth between Cal and me, much the same way I had with Vox earlier.

"Umm... okay..." she squeaked, frowning. She looked at me, and I gave her a nod, squeezing her shoulder.

"Go with him and make sure he's alright. I'll text you later," I whispered in her ear, and her frown deepened, but she nodded, climbing into the passenger seat.

Vox came up to stand beside me. Thankfully, he hadn't seemed to notify Cassandra that her brother was back. I had a feeling if she came out here, things would have been even more of a disaster.

Cal looked at Vox, his mouth forming a firm line.

"You and I are no longer partners. I've been reassigned, and you've been excommunicated from Apex. If you come back, Damian will kill you."

His delivery was flat, and Vox scowled, but Cal just turned on his heel and got into the driver's seat of the Aston Martin.

“I’ll come by with your stuff later, Naomi!” I called, but my words were drowned out by the car’s engine.

I waited for the usual screech and groan of Cal’s robot music, but nothing was playing on the speakers as he pulled out, and I frowned.

Cal *always* had music playing in the car...

Naomi waved to me as Cal drove away, and I tried to give her a reassuring look, but I wasn’t feeling super optimistic myself.

I turned to Vox to demand he give me some clue as to what the fuck was going on, but he was already jogging toward the G-Wagon.

“Hey! Wait! Where are you going?” I chased after Vox, but he leapt into the car and locked the doors, preventing me from entering the vehicle. I pulled at the handle frantically. If he was going after Cal, I wanted to go too.

But Vox cut me an angry glare and pointed back at the house.

Fuck, I wished this dude would just fucking talk to me.

He pointed at the house again and gave me a look that said *please fucking listen to me for once*.

As much as it killed me to do it, I sighed and stepped back, remembering how easily he had disarmed me earlier.

“Bring him back,” I ordered through the crack in the window. Vox nodded as if to say, *‘That’s the fucking plan.’*

And he peeled out of the driveway, heading in the same direction Cal had gone.

61



Cal Walker

Naomi wouldn't leave me the fuck alone. I brought her back home and basically told her that if she cared about me at all, she would stay in the fucking house.

I knew Cass was still at Fairview, but I wasn't ready to face her yet, and I knew Vox would get her home safe, even if we couldn't be friends anymore. I had barely made it through the conversation with Ryan without fucking breaking down. I couldn't handle dealing with a pissed-off Cassandra, too.

After almost an hour of trying to grill me on where I had been and what happened to me, I think Naomi finally caught on that I was hanging by a thread.

I'd tried my best to stay strong in front of Ryan, but telling him we were over almost killed me. I would have rather gone through two more weeks of torture than have to be the reason he had that heartbroken look on his face.

Then he kissed me, and it was the hardest thing in the fucking world to push him away.

I was sure Damian was watching somehow. This was all a test to see if I really had learned my lesson. I knew it was because I knew how Damian worked.

He may have let me go, but I was definitely on probation.

After Damian branded me, I spent the next day recovering in my room. He patched me up, and though the brand still fucking hurt more than any other injury I had ever sustained, I was grateful for the pain.

It's what saved me from caving and giving in when Ryan kissed me. His chest had bumped the brand, and it snapped me out of the insanely powerful spell he seemed to cast over me every time he was even remotely close to me.

If I hadn't pushed him away, Damian would have killed him. I was honestly still terrified he would kill him just because I'd allowed the kiss to happen at all.

All I could do now was stay away until this all blew over, and I could convince Damian that I'd forgotten all about my perfect little ginger snap.

After Naomi had finally taken pity on me and gone to bed, I sat in our living room with a bottle of scotch and my phone.

Damian hadn't deleted my conversation with Ryan. The name '*Ginger Snap*' (with over fifty unread texts) glared up at me in the dark.

'Did you get any of my messages? I've been so worried about you, Cal.'

My thumb hovered over the conversation as I struggled with my desire to open it. I just wanted to drink up Ryan's words like cold water on a hot day.

Instead, I took a burning swig of scotch.

This was likely another test.

I knew that the next time I was at Apex, I would be asked to turn my phone over to Damian. He would check to see if I read his messages. If I did, it wouldn't help my case at all.

I should probably just delete them.

My thumb slid the conversation bar to the left, and I eyed the little trash can icon.

Just delete them.

I took another swig of scotch, the liquor burning down my throat and numbing the very *different* burn that was lighting up my chest where Damian had branded me.

I would forever live my life with his initials seared into my flesh, and I fucking *hated* it.

He was taking everything from me... even Vox was gone now.

My new partner was none other than everyone's favorite asshat: McGreggor. When Damian woke me up this morning, informing me that I was now free to resume duty, he told me that I would be continuing the mission I had been working with Vox, but now McGreggor would be my second.

I didn't even have the energy to feel bitter about it. All I felt was a deep, aching sadness. I was so tired, but every time I shut my eyes, all I saw was the heartbroken look on Ryan's face when I told him I didn't want him anymore.

He cared about me.

It was more than I could have hoped for. Even just a few weeks ago, I might have never believed there would be a day when Ryan would look at me like that.

Like he wanted me.

But, of course, I couldn't keep him.

If Damian hurt him because of me, I would never recover from it.

When it wasn't Ryan's face haunting me, it was Damian's whiskey eyes and the mind-bending pain of the brand searing into my chest that kept me from sleeping.

At least he'd kept his promise and let me take Naomi back home. He hadn't hurt my sisters...

My thumb was still hovering over the tiny trash can that would erase Ryan's messages forever when my phone vibrated.

It was a text from McGreggor, and I scowled. Taking another long pull of scotch, I opened it.

MCGREGGOR:

I have a lead. Be outside in ten minutes, faggot.

Snorting, I took another few gulps of liquor before shooting him a thumbs-up emoji. My vision was blurry, and I was seeing double already.

I almost laughed out loud at the fact that I was about to go on a mission with a merc who hated me while I was already half in the bag.

Whatever. Maybe if I got lucky, it would be the last mission I ever fucking went on. As the alcohol seeped into my veins and I stumbled to my

feet to get ready, I realized that for the first time after a life of fighting to survive, I didn't want to fight anymore.

I just wanted to rest. Hopefully, everyone would be able to forgive me for being so weak.

I fucking tried. I really did.

But it didn't seem to matter how hard I tried. I don't know what got into me to make me think I ever deserved more than this lonely life of violence and pain. My mother had been right. I was just a fucking demon, or some kind of devil, sent to this earth to fuck everything up.

Ryan called you an angel, though...

I shook my head, ridding myself of the thought. Thinking of Ryan would do me no good. I needed to get him out of my head.

It was better for everyone if I stayed away from them. *Especially him.*

I'd ruined his life enough as it was.

I needed to forget about Ryan and focus on whatever it was Damian wanted me to do.

This way, no one but me had to get hurt.

OceanofPDF.com

62



Cal Walker

McGreggor's car smelled like ass. I didn't bother talking much, considering I wasn't sure I would be able to speak without slurring.

The longer I sat in his shitty Lexus, the more drunk I started to feel, and I was grateful for the buzz. It made it easier for me to pretend I hadn't just hurt Ryan if my brain couldn't think thoughts.

If this had been a normal mission, I would have been asking a ton of questions.

Where were the marks?

How had he found them?

What was the plan of attack?

Who was covering who?

As it was, I didn't really give a fuck about this mission. I didn't really give a fuck about anything anymore.

So, when McGregor drove to the outskirts of Silent Hollow and parked somewhat close to the field I had fingered Ryan in, I didn't say anything.

I stumbled out of the car when he parked next to an old, rundown barn that had clearly been deserted for years.

My fingers felt fat and clumsy as I shoved my Glock into the pocket of my hoodie, and I had to focus a lot on putting one foot in front of the other.

“This way, faggot. They’re burying a mark in the woods.”

I snorted.

Perfect.

They could bury my ass out there next.

I followed McGreggor into the treeline with one eye closed, doing my best to see despite the fact that I had double vision.

I could barely see straight, and when the canopy of the trees cut out the light from the moon, it only made things worse.

If Vox were here, he would be furious with me for stomping through these woods with all the grace of a bull in a china shop... but Vox wasn’t here.

I was with incompetent ass McGreggor, and he was dumber than a bag of hammers. The dude was sober and making more noise than I was, so who fucking cared.

As we made our way deeper into the trees, three distinct male voices began to float through the woods. My drunk ass should have tensed and gone into stealth mode... Instead, I found myself chuckling as another clearly drunk voice cut through the dark.

“How was your trip?” a voice slurred.

“Fuck you, fucker. I didn’t see that.”

There was obnoxious laughter. “If you fell on him, I would have laughed my ass off.”

The voice is annoyed. “I wasn’t going to fall on him.”

“Logan and Dillon, kissing in a grave. K - I - S – OW.”

I could see them now through the trees; Ronan Carter and Logan Sutton were clearly burying a body with another guy I didn’t recognize. The third dude was hella pretty, though, with freckles that rivaled Ryan’s. My mouth flooded with a bitter taste at the thought that I would never be able to look at freckles again without my heart fucking breaking.

McGreggor pulled his gun out of its holster and glanced back at me as we approached the clearing.

“I’m going in first. I’m sick of you always getting the fucking credit. Cover me, bitch, or I’ll personally make sure your faggot ass gets chained

back up in that tub.”

Even in my drunken haze, McGregor’s words hit that part of my brain that made my whole body flood with rage.

I narrowed my eyes at the back of his head as he busted into the clearing, pointing his gun directly at Logan.

Logan, who seemed to have his hands full with a very drunk Ronan, looked up in shock at McGregor’s brazen invasion of their little murder party.

I watched Logan reach for his gun, but he wasn’t going to get to it in time. If I had been here with Vox, I would have already been sighting down my arm at one of the other men.

But I wasn’t with Vox.

I was with McGregor.

An insanely bad idea crossed my mind, and before I could take the time to process what I was doing, I slid my foot in front of McGregor and kicked out his ankle.

He tripped and went down.

Logan’s eyes widened in surprise as I sabotaged my own partner.

“What the fuck!” McGregor shouted. He glanced at me as he went down, his uggo face painted purple with fury. “You fucking FAGGOT!” He snarled.

Ronan’s mouth dropped open in shock at the slur, and he ripped a gun out of the pretty man’s holster.

“Oh, *hell no!*” he barked before shooting McGregor point-blank in the head with the other man’s gun.

Logan snatched the gun out of Ronan’s hand before McGregor’s brains had even hit the ground. He looked panicked.

“What the fuck, shortie!” he barked, handing the gun back to the pretty man, who looked shocked and tense as fuck.

Ronan just laughed, then made a finger gun. “Pirate eye! Buff, write that one down,” he said.

I squinted and realized he was talking to a fluffy, stuffed highland cow they had propped up on one of their tactical bags.

This dude was crazier than I was...damn.

“Are you talking to a stuffed animal?” I chuckled, my curiosity getting the better of me. Suddenly, Logan and the pretty boy had their guns pointed at me.

I hiccuped and waved.

“Hey guys,” I slurred. “Which one of you is shooting me?”

OceanofPDF.com

68



Cal Walker

Alexa, Play: The Magick - Demo - Witchz

For a second, everything was quiet. Then, Ronan's body tensed in rage. He whirled, striding to their bags, pointing an angry finger in the stuffed animal's face. "Fuck you, Buffalo! He's protecting them, so he's just as bad!"

"Ronan," the pretty boy warned.

"And fuck you too, Dakota." For a second, I saw two of them before Ronan morphed back into one. And then he was rushing at me.

My drunk ass almost giggled when I realized he was going to attack me with a plushie.

"Fuck you, you fucking pedo lover!" Ronan screamed, and suddenly, the situation wasn't funny anymore.

"What the fuck did you just call me!?" I snarled as Ronan beat me over the head with the highland cow.

“Pedo lover, you fuck! You *disgust me!*”

“Pedo lover!? I fucking kill pedos, you dumbass!” I slurred. I tried to throw a punch, but my split vision was making me hella clumsy.

The world tilted, and suddenly, Ronan and I were rolling around on the ground, and he kept smacking me in the face over and over again with the stuffed toy.

“Don’t lie! You work for Apex! We know you’ve been trying to protect all these fucking pedophiles! You’re Damian Ryker’s *goon!* He’s like the pedo *king!*”

Even as drunk as I was, my blood ran cold at Ronan’s words. My sluggish thoughts reeled, and suddenly, every time I had suspected Ryker was involved in some shady shit that involved kids swam to the surface of my mind.

I was working hard against the alcohol I had consumed, trying to process the fact that I had been right this whole time.

Instead of trusting my gut, I’d allowed myself to look the other way.

It was easier to pretend that I was wrong, but now, with Ronan literally screaming the truth in my face, I couldn’t pretend anymore.

I had allowed Damian to manipulate me and turn me into the type of monster I’d sworn to kill... and I had never hated myself more.

As the realization rolled over me, suddenly, the constant *smack smack smack* of the stuffed cow hitting my face became too much for me to bear, and I snatched it by the head.

Intending to pull it away so I could ask Ronan more about what he had just said, I yanked, but Ronan wouldn’t let go.

With a frustrated growl, I rolled so that he was now beneath me, and I pulled harder on the cow, trying to get him to stop hitting me long enough to talk.

Everything went to shit, though, when the cow’s head ripped right off, and Ronan froze beneath me.

I watched as the man’s face went paper white as he realized I’d decapitated his toy, and then he was *screaming*.

This wasn’t a scream of rage; it was the type of sound someone made when they’d literally been stabbed or just watched someone they loved die.

It was a *wail*, and the sound chilled me to my bones.

I frowned, and then there was a *bang!* And suddenly, pain like I had never felt in my entire life tore through my side.

“Dakota! What the fuck! You shot him!?” Logan barked, and I glanced down to find that what Logan had said must be true.

There was an unnerving amount of blood blooming beneath my hoodie, and it took my wasted ass a second to process just how serious this was.

Collapsing on top of Ronan, my vision shuttered in and out. I fought to maintain consciousness as Vox suddenly appeared in the clearing.

“V-Vox?” I mumbled, rolling off Ronan and pressing the cow’s head to my side in an effort to keep my blood inside my fucking body.

Logan immediately pointed his gun at Vox, but he hesitated as Vox held both his hands up to show he was unarmed. My friend’s face was paler than I had ever seen it. He glanced at me, then dragged his silver gaze up to meet Logan’s.

“I’m sorry! I thought he stabbed Ronan or something. Fuck, Ronan, why did you fucking scream like that?” Pretty boy Dakota was yammering, but no one was listening to him.

Logan and Vox were locked in a stare-down, and I wondered if they were going to kill him, too.

I fucking hoped not.

I didn’t want anyone else getting hurt because I was fucking impulsive idiot.

Vox maintained eye contact with Logan and tilted his head toward me in a clear request to check on me.

Logan’s jaw pulsed, and another long, tense moment passed before he nodded his head once and lowered his firearm.

What the fuck? They were letting us go?

Vox was on me in seconds, his hands gently skating over my side, causing me to flinch.

He let out a distressed huff and grabbed the arm I wasn’t using to hold the cow head and sling it over his shoulder.

I groaned as he forced me to my feet, shooting one last look back at Logan, Dakota, and the still-screaming Ronan.

Dakota was doing his best to comfort Ronan, but Logan was staring at us, and I could see the conflict on his face.

He wasn’t sure if letting us go was the right call.

Fuck, *I* wasn’t sure if it was the right call.

If what Ronan had said was true, and I’d really been protecting a bunch of people who hurt children, I deserved to be shot. Probably worse.

Guilt rolled through me as Vox helped me out of the woods and into the passenger seat of the G-Wagon.

My vision was fading, and the last thing I remembered before slipping into unconsciousness was Vox pressing his head against my temple in anguish.

Then, the car door slammed, and the engine rumbled to life, and I faded into the darkness of my mind, unsure if I even wanted to wake back up.

OceanofPDF.com

64



Ryan Fairview

Alexa, Play: Strange - Celeste

I was a fucking wreck. There was no point in pretending I wasn't. The house felt empty with Naomi gone, and I couldn't stop thinking about how broken Cal had been.

The guilt that was weighing on me was unbearable. All the times I had pushed Cal away were playing on a fucking loop in my head, especially in the early days. He'd clearly *needed* me, and all I had ever done was tell him to go away.

I was pacing the kitchen, doing what I always did, and overthinking every single moment where I could have been better for him.

That night, when he left after having dinner with us, I shouldn't have let him go. I should have tried harder to get him to stay, to *quit*.

I knew Apex was fucked. That man had been conditioning him and abusing him since he was a child.

Having met Vox, I now suspected that he had likely gone through something similar, though Vox seemed less eager to obey Damian's commands than Cal.

Maybe it's because Vox didn't have anyone he loved that he needed to protect... well, except for maybe Cal himself.

If someone like Vox couldn't keep him safe, how could I ever hope to help him?

I grit my teeth at how fucking useless I was feeling.

I needed to learn how to use a fucking gun.

Vox had been trying to teach me, but on some level, I had been resisting because... well... I could literally *speak* to dead people. The last thing I wanted to do was kill someone and have their ghost follow me around out of spite for the rest of my life.

But after seeing Cal in person and realizing just how much Damian Ryker had clearly fucked him up, I was quickly giving less and less shits.

I would kill fucking Damian myself and never lose a wink of sleep if I had the chance. The thought of him putting his hands on Cal made me see fucking red. He could haunt me all his bitch-ass wanted, and I would spend every day letting Cal fuck me while Ryker's cunt ghost watched. Just to rub it in his fucking face.

I let out a frustrated growl and stormed over to the cabinet where I knew Theo had kept the tequila.

Being helpless like this was not a feeling I wanted to get used to. I needed to do better... or at least do *something*.

Grabbing a bottle of Anejo and pulling out my phone, I opened my conversation with Cal for what felt like the ten-zillionth time.

I'd sent him messages every day while he was gone. They were all still unread. He hadn't looked at them, not even now that he was free again.

It hurt.

He had barged his way into my life, broken into my house, forced me to develop feelings for him, and now he was just... *gone*.

It had been so easy to take his smiles and his upbeat attitude for granted, and I'd never regretted anything more.

Scrolling through the unread messages I sent him, my heart squeezed in my chest.

They had started with me just frantically asking him where he was and if he was okay. Once I accepted the fact that he wasn't going to have access

to his phone for a while, I switched tactics.

I told him things I had never told anyone before.

I told him how I was pretty sure my mother was clairvoyant, and I was almost positive she had predicted that he would come into my life one day.

My mother had been telling me my '*dark angel*' was coming since I was a small child.

I was convinced now more than ever that she had been talking about him.

He was my dark angel, and I had been a fucking idiot to try to push him away.

Because now that he really was gone, I felt like I would give up an entire limb to get him back.

Tossing my phone angrily on the table, I spun off the lid of the tequila bottle and raised it to my lips. I just needed something to take the edge off and slow my mind down.

However, before I could take a swig, my mother swept into the room and gave me a stern look.

"Put that away, Ryan. You're going to need your wits about you tonight," she said, her voice firmer than I had ever heard it.

I frowned and lowered the bottle.

"What do you mean?"

Just then, Theo and Cassandra barrelled into the kitchen. I had texted Theo to let her know that Cal was back earlier, but I haven't heard anything since.

"I can't believe you're just telling me this *now!*" Cassandra snarled. She was dragging her Louis Vuitton luggage behind her, and Theo was tailing her with a bored expression on her face.

"Maybe I just wanted to keep you around a little longer. Not sure how I'll survive without your sparkling personality." Her eyes were shining, but she said it with such a dry, sarcastic tone that I couldn't tell if she was being serious or not.

Cassandra rounded on her. "You are *impossible!* My brother has been missing for a week, and when he comes back, you sit on the information for *hours!?* I could have been at his house by now! What if that twat waffle hurt him?"

"That twat waffle definitely hurt him," I deadpanned, sliding my hands into my pockets with a sigh. "I saw him earlier. He's injured for sure."

Cass looked like she couldn't decide if she wanted to punch me in the face or scream at me. Maybe both.

Theo shrugged. "Listen, Cass. I know you think blowing the fucking door down with your fire hose of an attitude helps things, but sometimes it's better to let things lie. The dude just got out of what I would assume is a traumatic situation. The last thing he needs is you freaking the fuck out and losing your shit all over him. I just figured he might want a couple minutes to lick his wounds before you go storming in there like you're the goddamn cavalry."

I glanced at Theo, cocking an eyebrow in surprise. Sometimes I forgot how perceptive she was. It was easy to get swept up in her gruff exterior and assume she wasn't paying attention or didn't give a shit about the people around her.

But in moments like this, I was always reminded that Theo *was* paying attention. And she *did* give a shit. I really should try to give her more credit.

"He'll be here soon," Iris said abruptly, and my skin turned to gooseflesh at the look on her face. My mother, who never seemed to be bothered by anything, looked as grave as she did the day my father died.

"We will need to work together to save him."

"What are you going on about?" Cass asked, though her face was quickly going pale. I think she had caught on that Iris was a little different than the rest of us.

Over the last week, I had learned that Cass was incredibly smart. Though she hadn't straight up asked if my mother was a witch, I was pretty sure she had figured it out.

At first, she'd seemed skeptical. However, like most people, after spending a few days with Iris, I could see she was getting more and more suspicious about how unnervingly accurate my mother's seemingly random observations generally turned out to be.

She was just too on the nose for it to be chalked up to coincidence.

"Save who, mom?" I whispered. My entire body was freezing cold. It felt like my blood had turned to ice because I knew... Before she even said the words, I *knew* who needed saving.

"Your dark angel, dear."

65



Ryan Fairview

As if the universe timed it, the back door nearly blew off its hinges, causing all of us to jump. Time seemed to slow down as I turned to find that Vox had literally kicked the door in while trying to support a barely conscious Callum Walker.

There. Was. Blood.

Everywhere.

Cal was slumped over Vox's left shoulder, his dark hair falling into his gorgeous eyes, hiding them from me. He was holding something wet and crusty to his abdomen, where most of the blood seemed to be coming from.

"What the fuck happened!?" Cassandra was screeching. Vox looked up at me and made eye contact. He was pale, and the absolutely terrified look on his face told me that this was just as serious as it seemed.

He seemed to be begging me to do something with his eyes, and I realized that there was no way we could take Cal to a hospital... not if he had been injured doing something illegal.

The world fell away, and suddenly, I snapped into action. Falling into the version of myself that took control and powered through whatever bullshit life threw at me, I straightened.

“Theo, get Cass out of here. Vox, take Cal downstairs, get him on the table in the embalming room.”

“What! I’m not fucking going anywhere! That’s *my* brother!”

I rounded on Cassandra and pinned her with what I knew was one of my coldest looks.

Her eyes widened in surprise. Usually, I kept quiet when she was having one of her moments, but I didn’t have the patience for her today.

“Yes, he is *your* brother, and in case you haven’t noticed, he’s fucking bleeding out. Now unless you know a private doctor that you can get over here in time to save his fucking life, I need you to give me space to work.”

Cass opened and closed her mouth several times, apparently completely shocked by my sudden show of force. I watched her struggle with her need to always be in control before resigning herself to the fact that I was right. If she wasn’t going to be helpful, she needed to stay out of the way.

Finally, she straightened herself and gave me a firm nod, which made me like her a lot more than I previously had. You had to respect someone who was self-aware enough to realize that they were being a jackass.

“Done. Keep him stable. I’ll see if I can find someone.”

I raised my eyebrows but didn’t bother to ask how she was going to find someone we could trust. Maybe there was some secret high-powered club full of lawyers and surgeons that helped each other out on a case-by-case basis.

What did I know?

I knew how to stitch up bodies. That’s what I fucking knew.

Okay, normally, they were *dead* bodies, and I was sure I wouldn’t know what the fuck to do if Cal had an internal bleed... but I certainly was going to try to do whatever I could to keep him alive until Cass could get a real doctor in here.

Cass whipped out her phone and stalked out of the room. She was already dialing a number when I went to Cal’s other side and slid my arm around his back, doing my best to help Vox get him down the stairs and into the prep room.

“Ginger snap... is that... you?” Cal whimpered as I helped him stumble toward the stairs. Despite the fact that I had never been so scared in my life,

my heart soared in my chest.

He called me ginger snap.

“Yes, baby. It’s me. I’ve got you. We’re going to get you all fixed up, okay? I just need you to put one foot in front of the other.”

“I... I fucked up. *So bad.*” He choked on a sob, and my fucking heart shattered into a million pieces.

“Shhh. Shhh, it’s okay. We’re going to fix it. Whatever it is, we’ll fix it together, alright, angel? I just need you to try to stay awake for now. Can you do that for me?”

“I don’t know.”

“You have to try for me, baby. Keep those gorgeous eyes open.”

He turned his brown gaze to face me, and my heart almost stopped when I saw how dazed they were.

He was so pale... he was losing so much *fucking blood*.

“Vox, we need to move faster.” I tried to keep my voice calm so as not to upset Cal more than he already was. Vox nodded and picked up the pace.

As quickly and carefully as possible, we managed to get Cal down the stairs and into the preparation room.

I rushed to wash my hands and get on all my PPE. Forcing myself to breathe and keep as calm as possible, I set up a small end table with all the equipment I thought I might need.

Once I was ready, I glanced at Cal, biting my lip beneath my surgical mask. He was still clutching that blood-soaked cloth to his side when Vox had him lie down on the stainless steel table.

I wrapped my hand around it and gently pried it away from Cal’s grip, frowning when I realized it wasn’t a towel or a cloth at all. It seemed to be the head of a stuffed highland cow.

I shook my head, not bothering to ask what the fuck that was all about.

“Get cleaned up and put on gloves. You’re going to have to be my nurse,” I barked at Vox, who nodded and leapt into action. He was nearly as pale as Cal was.

“Straight scissors.”

Vox immediately handed them to me, and I used them to cut off Cal’s shirt. He groaned beneath me, and I swore, annoyed that I was causing him unnecessary pain just by touching him.

This was a fucking morgue. I didn’t have any general anesthetic. The strongest shit I had was a bottle of ibuprofen in the medicine cabinet

upstairs.

“I’m sorry, baby. I know it hurts. I’m going to try to be as gentle as possible.”

He nodded, swallowing so hard I heard it. Letting out a shaky breath, I did my best to stay focused. Once I got his shirt off, I was able to better assess the damage.

There was a bullet wound on his right side. Dark blood was pouring from it so freely that I was truly worried he might need a blood transfusion. I didn’t know his blood type or where the fuck to get something like that on such short notice.

I really hoped Cass could get a doctor here quickly.

“Put pressure here,” I ordered, showing Vox where I wanted him to put his fingers. One thing I did know a lot about was how blood moved through the human body. A big part of embalming was draining the body of blood so you could replace it with the embalming fluid.

So, I was pleased when Vox pressed his gloved fingers into Cal’s side the way I instructed, and the steady spurts of blood immediately slowed down to nearly a full stop.

Taking the opportunity to examine the rest of him and make sure the bullet wound was the only thing I needed to worry about, my heart stuttered when I found another wound directly over his heart.

This was not a bullet wound.

It was a fucking burn and a really bad one. I looked closer, confused at how a burn could make a shape like that. It was purulent, red, and angry. It might even be infected.

I gently touched the outer edge of it with my gloved finger, and Cal hissed in pain beneath my touch.

“Ginger... snap. That... *hurts*,” he whined, and I glanced at him, but his eyes were crushed closed. He was sweating now and so pale he was nearly green.

I wanted to ask him how he got the burn, but I didn’t think he would be able to answer right now. He was in too much pain.

It almost looked like it formed the shape of deformed letters.

DB? OP...?

I shook my head. It was the lesser of his two injuries. I would ask him about the burn later; right now, I needed to make sure the bullet wasn’t still in his body.

I glanced up at Vox, who was staring at the angry mark on Cal's chest with a murderous look on his face.

"Hey, snap out of it," I barked, getting his attention. His eyes darted to meet mine, and the rage I saw burning in there was so intense I almost took a step back.

Shaking off the moment of discomfort, I did my best to focus on the task at hand.

"I'm going to check and see if the bullet passed through his body. If it has, we'll have to do our best to keep him from bleeding out while we wait for help."

Vox gave me a curt nod, and I walked to his side of the table.

"I'm going to try to roll him a bit. I need to check and see if there's an exit wound. Try to keep pressure where I showed you, and keep him steady. We need to move him as little as possible."

Vox nodded and immediately moved to follow my orders.

Together, we were able to lift Cal enough for me to check his back. I let out a sigh of relief when I saw there was an exit wound, which meant the bullet wasn't still inside of him.

Thank god.

I brushed my gloved fingers over his uninjured flesh. Though I couldn't see much, I wasn't surprised to find that Cal's back seemed to be just as heavily tattooed as the rest of him. It looked like a large piece made up of black feathers, but it was hard to tell, considering how much blood he was covered in.

Gently laying him back down, I turned to Vox.

"Stay here; keep pressure on his wound exactly like that. I'm going to get some pillows so we can elevate his legs."

Vox, silent as ever, just gave me a determined nod, and I rushed from the room.



I WAS GATHERING UP ALL THE THROW PILLOWS FROM THE COUCH IN THE living room when Cass appeared.

"I found someone willing to help. He'll be here in ten minutes."

“Good,” I grunted, rushing past her to get back downstairs.

“Hey.”

“What?” I snapped, agitated with the interruption. Though, when I glanced up and took a moment to take in her expression, I softened.

She looked just as scared and worried as I was. Her face was nearly white and there was a fine tremor in her hands. I had never seen her look so vulnerable.

“Can you tell me, uhm... is he...?”

“He’s stable for now,” I reassured her. “Get the doctor downstairs as soon as possible. Maybe let him know we might need antibiotics and blood. Do you know his blood type?”

She nodded. “He’s O-positive.”

Relief rushed through me. “Okay, that’s good.” It was a common one. I was O-positive, too. If worse came to worst, I would find a way to funnel my own damn blood into his body if I had to. He was not fucking dying on me. I wouldn’t allow it.

I hurried back downstairs with the pillows and stuffed them under Cal’s legs. Vox had done his job and kept pressure on the wound, but he was now also holding Cal’s hand so tightly his knuckles were white.

“Where’s... Ryan.” Cal’s voice sounded weak, and his eyes were closed. I rushed to his head and brushed his hair out of his eyes, dropping a kiss on his forehead through my mask.

“I’m right here, baby. The doctor will be here soon.”

“S-stay... with me?” He coughed before immediately wincing. “*Please*. I’m s-sorry... I left you earlier... I didn’t... mean.”

“Oh, baby, I know. I know you didn’t mean it.” I whispered, dropping more gentle kisses on his forehead. “I’m not going anywhere. We’re going to get you all fixed up, and then I’m going to tuck you up into bed, okay?”

He didn’t answer, and I bit my lip. His breathing was more shallow than I would have liked. I was about to whip out my phone to call Cass when she walked into the prep room with a man I didn’t recognize.

He was younger than I expected, maybe in his early thirties. He had a sandy mop of golden hair and blue eyes. I watched him assess Cal’s wrecked state, and his lips formed a firm line.

“Ryan, this is my friend, Dr. Callahan.”

“Call me Tom,” he said. “I would shake your hand, but I think it would be better if I scrubbed in instead.”

I nodded, letting out a sigh of relief. “Yes, please,” I rasped, and Dr. Callahan didn’t waste another second. He got straight to work, and for the first time since Vox and Cal had stumbled through the door, I felt a glimmer of hope.

Maybe we would make it out of this after all.

OceanofPDF.com

66



Ryan Fairview

It took a few hours, but even with limited resources, Dr. Callahan was able to get Cal stable.

I replaced Vox and took on the position of nurse, freeing him to go make sure the house was secure. Though I had no idea what had happened to Cal, I knew there would likely be consequences, so I was extremely glad Vox was here to make sure we were protected.

Cass and Theo went to get Naomi and bring her back, so it was just me and Dr. Callahan in the embalming room when he finally announced that he had done all he could.

“He lost more blood than I would have liked, but as long as you let him rest, he should be okay. I’m more worried about the brand on his chest. It’s infected. I don’t think it’s to the point where he needs an IV, but start him on these antibiotics for now.”

Dr. Callahan reached into a black leather bag he had brought with him and fished out a bottle of pills.

“Sorry, did you say...*brand*?” I rasped, and the doctor met my eyes, his lips pursing.

“Yes. That’s what it looks like.”

The world felt like it was literally tilting beneath my feet. I glanced at Cal, who was now completely unconscious on the table, and my lip trembled.

He had passed out during the doctor’s inspection of the bullet wound. Tom informed me it was difficult to say for *sure* that there was no internal bleeding, considering we weren’t in a proper OR and he didn’t have access to a scope.

But he was ninety-nine percent sure. Cal had gotten *really* lucky, and he was relatively confident he would make a full recovery.

He just needed to rest.

My mouth opened because I felt like I needed to say *something* about the fact that the man I was pretty sure I was in love with had been branded like he was a piece of fucking *livestock*.

But I couldn’t speak. No words came out.

I felt like if I uttered a word, I would just start screaming, and I might never stop.

Dr. Callahan rested a sympathetic hand on my shoulder, gesturing to the bottle of pills he had given me.

“Those should help, but make sure you also clean both wounds regularly and give him fresh bandages daily. Also, please call me immediately if he starts complaining about any excessive abdominal pain or tenderness. It might be a sign that I’m wrong, and there’s an internal bleed I missed. Here’s my card.”

He handed me a business card, and I stuffed it in my pocket, unable to look away from my sleeping angel.

“Would you like help getting him up into a bed?”

I glanced at the doctor, feeling like I was going into shock myself. It felt strange to ask a doctor to help me carry Cal up several flights of stairs, but I found myself nodding.

“Alright. I’ll take his left side,” he said, and together, we slung Cal’s arms over our shoulders and began the long, arduous trip up to my room.

Once we were inside, Dr. Callahan helped me lie him down on my bed, and I winced at how filthy he was.

“I need to clean him up,” I whispered. “Is it ok to wake him up for that? Should I let him rest and do it later?”

“He absolutely needs to rest, but we don’t want to risk further infection. It would be better to clean him as much as you can now and let him sleep for as long as possible afterward,” the doctor informed me, and I nodded.

“Worse comes to worse; you can try and sponge him off in bed, but honestly, the cleaner you can get him, the better.”

“Okay. Thank you, doctor. For everything,” I whispered, and he gave me a gentle smile.

“No worries. I owed Cass a favor anyway, and I’m glad she called me in for something like this. I can tell he’s really loved, and I’m happy I was able to help save his life. Just...”

Dr. Callahan turned to face me, his blue eyes turning serious. “He was *really* lucky his wounds weren’t more serious, and honestly, if he hadn’t gotten that burn looked at, he would have been risking a blood infection as early as tomorrow. If he carries on like this, he’s not going to make it past thirty.”

I swallowed at the doctor’s words and cleared my throat roughly.

“I understand.”

Dr. Callahan patted me on the shoulder and gave me a curt head bob. “Anyway. You have my card. Call me if you need me. Have a good night, Mr. Fairview.”

“You too, Doctor.”

“Tom, please.” He smiled, and I grinned back.

“Ryan, then.”

“Goodnight, Ryan.”

Then, he was gone, and I was left alone with my broken, dark angel.



“CAL, BABY, WAKE UP,” I WHISPERED, DOING MY BEST TO TRY TO GENTLY rouse Cal. He groaned, and his eyelashes fluttered against his cheeks.

“Ginger snap?”

“Yeah. It’s me. We need to get you cleaned up, then you can rest. Can you try to stand for me?”

“It hurts.” He complained, and I shut my eyes, resting my head against his forehead, wishing with all my heart I could take his pain away.

“I know, angel. But I need you to try for me.”

He nodded and groaned again, doing his best to push himself up. I positioned myself back under his arm so I could help him stand, and together, we made our way into the ensuite.

I flicked on the light and was about to guide him toward the large, black, claw-footed tub when he suddenly jerked away from me.

“Cal, what—?”

“No...” he moaned, stumbling back out of the bathroom, his eyes wide with panic. “I can’t go back in the tub. Please. No.” A tear slid down his face, and I rushed to catch him as he nearly collapsed in his rush to get away from the bathtub.

“Okay!” I blurted, wrapping my arms around him as best I could without touching his injuries. “No tub. We won’t use the bathtub. Let’s get in the shower. Is that better?”

He turned panicked eyes onto me, and I reached up to brush a tear away, frowning.

For a moment, he didn’t answer, but I just held his gaze and kept him as steady on his feet as I could, which was no easy task considering how much larger he was than me.

Finally, he swallowed and nodded. My heart swelled with warmth at the level of trust he seemed to be giving me, and I placed a gentle kiss on his clavicle.

“Let’s get these off,” I whispered, guiding him toward the wall so he had something to lean on while I helped him get out of his jeans. He still had his little velvet pouch that my mother had given him in his pocket, and I smiled at that.

Even when he was pushing me away, he’d kept it on him.

Slowly, I helped him undress and got him settled in the shower. Thankfully, it was large enough that I could fit three Cals in here, and there was a spacious tile outcropping built into the wall. I used it for shampoo and soaps normally, but it was a perfect seat for my injured man.

I got him settled and gently used the detachable shower head to rinse him off. He bulked at that too, but I let him hold it and control the temperature and pressure of the water, which seemed to calm him down.

It was taking everything in me not to pepper him with questions. Why had he seemed so triggered by the bathtub? Why did he wince every time I sprayed him with the shower head? What the fuck had that piece of shit done to him to fuck him up this bad?

But I didn't want to put him through any more stress than absolutely necessary. I could tell he wasn't one hundred percent present. He was in a sort of dazed, half-conscious state, and I just wanted to get him clean and back into bed as quickly as possible.

I got to work gently washing the blood from his skin. I left gentle kisses across his cheeks as I worked, making sure he knew he was with me and he was safe.

As the tacky blood melted off his beautiful, tanned skin, the feathery back piece I had glimpsed earlier became clearer and clearer.

My throat closed up, and I swallowed hard as I realized he had black angel wings tattooed on his back, with the words '*expelled from heaven, raised in hell*' scrawled across his shoulders.

Running my fingers gently over the words, I peppered his wings with more kisses, blinking back tears.

'You dark angel is coming, dear.'

My mother's words rang through my mind, and it took everything in me not to break down into tears.

Cal was the dark angel I'd been waiting my whole life for.

He was here, and he was *broken*.

I resolved at that moment that even if it took the rest of my life, I would make sure he would one day be able to spread his wings and fly again.

No matter the cost.

Once I was satisfied that he was clean, I dried him off and dressed both his wounds with fresh bandages.

After giving him one of the pills the doctor had left me and a glass of water, I finally was able to get him tucked in my bed.

"Ryan...?" He whimpered as I stepped away to slip out of my own clothes, which were now wet from the shower.

"Yeah, angel? What do you need?"

"Stay with me."

My heart cracked, and I swallowed past the impossibly large lump that formed in my throat at how vulnerable he sounded.

“I’m not going anywhere, baby. I’m just getting changed, and then we’re going to rest,” I reassured him, leaning over the bed and pressing a kiss to his cheek.

“I’m sorry... for what I said... before.” His eyes were closed, and his words were barely audible.

I slipped into a clean pair of boxers and crawled into bed with him, pulling him toward me as gently as possible. He melted into me like it was the most natural thing in the world, and I instinctively brushed back his damp hair, dropping a kiss on top of his head.

“It’s already forgotten, angel. Rest now. We’ll talk more in the morning.”

“Ryan?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you for saving me.”

My eyes burned, and I did my best not to choke on my unshed tears.

“Of course, angel. I’ll always be here to save you.”

OceanofPDF.com

67



Cal Walker

I was so fucking comfy. Maybe the comfiest I had ever been in my life. Where the fuck *was* I? Everything was all soft and squishy and warm...

Wait.

I wasn't *supposed* to be feeling soft and squishy and warm.

I was supposed to be in my shitty bed at Apex.

My eyes shot open, and I had a horrifying, disoriented moment. I didn't know where I was, and waking up somewhere unexpected was rarely a good thing when you're a mercenary.

Shooting up in bed - well, I *tried* to shoot up. I wasn't very successful. A sudden *blinding* pain exploded through my side like someone was stabbing me with a white-hot poker. I let out a sharp, surprised bark of pain.

"Whathaaafuckkk..." I hissed, leaning back into the softest pillows I had ever touched. Squinting and looking around the room, I quickly realized that I was in Ryan's room.

Fuck.

Bad.

Bad, bad, bad, bad!

The man himself was, thankfully, nowhere to be seen.

Perfect.

I would just get up, put on some pants—since a quick check under the sheets told me I was currently going commando—and get the fuck out of here before he came back.

Taking a deep breath to test how badly I was injured, I tried to sit up again, this time using my elbows instead of the muscles in my abdomen.

Flashes of memory from the night before were coming back to me now.

I remembered the three dudes killing McGregor. They had said something about us protecting a child sex trafficker... which... was twice now that I suspected Damian was involved in something shady like that. Unfortunately, before I'd had time to process that little piece of information, the night had gone to shit.

I remembered getting shot.

Vaguely, I remembered Vox busting in to save my sorry ass, but after that, everything went pretty dark.

I had zero recollection of how I'd ended up back at Fairview and in Ryan's bed.

The wound in my side was bandaged, and I could feel the familiar pull of stitches as I did my best to wiggle my way out of bed. There was also a bandage over the brand Damian had given me, though the dressings looked like they needed to be changed...

I could get to that once I got back to Apex. I needed to confront Damian about the child trafficking once and for all.

As much as I was pissed off about the possibility that Damian might have been involved in child trafficking this whole fucking time... there was an even more urgent reason that I needed to leave.

I needed to get the fuck out of here before Damian realized where I was and took it out on Ryan.

Painfully slowly, I pushed the sheets down and worked toward swinging my legs over the edge of the bed. After an excruciating push that had me literally biting down on my tongue to keep from gasping in pain, my feet touched the ground.

I grinned.

Success.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

Shit.

Busted.

I glanced over at the door to find the most handsome, perfect, gorgeous, sexy ginger snap standing in a soft T-shirt and blue jeans by the door to his room.

He was freshly showered and shaved, and he was holding a tray with what looked like pancakes and tea. There was even a tiny vase with a single lily balanced in the corner.

“Uhhh...” I stumbled over my words, somehow unable to complete a sentence.

Fuck, he was so good-looking.

He had his little grumpy scowl on his face. The one that made a crease between his perfect eyebrows. I just wanted to smooth it out with my thumb and then annoy him until it came back.

“You’re on strict bed rest, buddy. Lay back down.”

Buddy?! Who the fuck was he calling buddy?

I snorted and forced myself to give him a glare. It wasn’t my best work. I was finding it almost impossible to find that dead place I needed to get to if I was going to successfully push him away.

Remembering how broken and sad he had looked when I told him I didn’t want him anymore, I just couldn’t do it. The guilt that welled in my chest at the thought was unbearable.

Maybe I should just be straight up with him.

“Ginger snap...”

His lip twitched up at his nickname, and he stalked into the room, putting the tray of food on the end table next to me. When he looked down at my fully exposed and naked body, I almost made a joke about him checking me out, but it quickly became apparent that wasn’t where his mind was. He crouched down and immediately checked the bandages on my side and chest, frowning to himself. I shivered as he passed the most gentle touches over my bare skin. He glanced up to meet my gaze, that little crease still perched stubbornly between his brows.

I caved and reached forward, cupping his face with my hand and using my thumb to smooth it away.

His ‘stern boi’ look softened, and he touched a hand to my chin, causing me to swallow.

“How are you feeling, angel? Are you experiencing any discomfort in your abdomen? Any intense pain?”

He called me angel again...

Why did he keep calling me that?

“No...” I whispered, swallowing once more.

I was in pain, but it was more of a dull, constant throb. The kind of pain that faded into the background if I stayed still enough.

“Do you need to go to the bathroom? Is that why you’re trying to get up? I can help you walk if you need a hand. We can also get a wheelchair for you if you think that would be easier. It might give you more autonomy while you’re healing.”

I snorted, disgusted with the idea of him seeing me wheel around in a chair like some sort of invalid.

“I don’t need a fucking wheelchair,” I snapped, and his mouth twitched again.

“Well, okay. Do you need to go to the bathroom?”

I scowled. “No.”

“Then what are you doing trying to get out of bed, Callum?”

Dropping my gaze, I tongued my lip ring.

I had to tell him that I needed to leave. Why was it so hard?

When it became apparent I wasn’t going to be able to answer him, he sighed.

“I see. So you were trying to leave?” he said, reading my mind.

He stood up and crossed his arms over his chest, giving me that stern look of his again.

“Yeah. I have to.”

It was his turn to snort. “You’re not going anywhere, Callum. Get back in bed.”

I narrowed my eyes on him, a low growl building in my chest.

“Have you forgotten who’s in charge here?”

He rolled his eyes, and before I could react, the sassy bitch reached forward and poked me in the side, *right* in my fucking bullet wound.

“AH! Whaddafack!” I barked, jerking away from him. His eyes sparkled with amusement, and he snatched up my ankles, spinning my legs back into bed and pulling the covers up over me while I twitched in pain.

“Lie down, you fucking drama queen.” He sighed and snatched up the tray of food, sliding it onto my lap. “Don’t move, or you’ll spill the tea.”

I glared at him, stilling beneath the tray so I wouldn't make a mess.

"Ryan. I have to go. If Damian finds out I'm here, he'll hurt you. He'll hurt Iris and Theo, too."

Ryan didn't seem concerned at all. He fluffed my pillows behind me and pulled open the drawer at the end table, fussing around with what looked like a roll of gauze and surgical tape.

"Eat your pancakes, then we're going to need to clean and re-dress your wounds. Do you need anything for the pain? Dr. Callahan left me some T3s that you can take if you think you need them. It's also almost time for your antibiotic."

"Aren't you listening? Damian will *kill* you, Ryan! He'll kill your whole family! I can't be the one responsible for that. I could never live with myself. I need to get out of here before he figures out where I am."

Finally, Ryan stopped fussing and turned to face me, giving me a hard look.

"Damian already knows you're here. Vox texted him."

"Wh-what?" I felt the blood drain from my face.

No, no, no, no... this couldn't be happening.

Ryan sighed and sat on the edge of the bed. He reached over and cupped my face gently, brushing his thumb over my lips.

"I want you to quit Apex," he said, and I fucking laughed out loud.

"No one *quits* Apex, Ryan."

He pursed his lips and shrugged. "Then I guess you'll be the first."

"I can't. Baby, he will *kill* you. Do you not fucking understand what I'm saying?"

"He can try," Ryan said with the stubborn innocence of someone who had no fucking idea how bad of a man Damian was.

"You don't know what you're talking about, Ryan."

He shrugged. "Maybe not, but Vox seems to think it's possible, and I'm fairly certain he knows what he's doing when it comes to this kind of stuff."

"He has conditional hits out on my sisters!" I protested, and Ryan nodded.

"Yeah. He had quite a few of those. Vox thinks he found most of them. He's countered the offers. He also released a notice on one of your dark web board thingies letting the bad guys know that we'll match and beat anything Damian promises to eliminate any future contracts he may try to slip by."

“*What!?*” I exclaimed, my mouth literally falling open. If that was true, how was this fucking house not already on fire? Damian would be fucking *livid!*

Ryan smirked as if he was reading my mind. “Vox has Fairview pretty locked down. I don’t think anyone can even get up the street without him knowing about it.”

I was gaping at Ryan, barely managing to process what he was telling me.

“Listen. At the end of the day, it has to be *your* choice to quit, Callum. I can’t make that choice for you. But I’m going to be straight up here. I want you to quit. Consequences be damned. You deserve better than the horrible things that piece of shit has forced you to endure.” His gaze fell to the bandage on my chest, and shame swirled in my gut when I realized he probably knew I had been branded.

“It’s *not* my decision to make, Ryan,” I whispered, my eyes suddenly burning with tears. “I can’t make a decision like that and put all your lives at risk.”

He nodded. “We thought you might say something like that. So we’ve decided to make it easy for you.”

There was a soft knock on the door, and I glanced up to find Naomi, Cass, Theo, Iris, and Vox all crowded in the frame.

Ryan turned and beamed at them.

“Can we come in?” Naomi asked softly, and I tucked my blanket up higher, not wanting to accidentally flash my little sister.

“Yeah. Please. Come in, all of you. I think Cal needs to hear this directly from you guys, or his stubborn ass isn’t going to get it.”

I scoffed, but Ryan just smirked at me.

Everyone filed into the room, and the way they were all staring at me like they were *worried* about me was making my chest tight. Even grumpy-ass Theo looked concerned.

“Did you tell him we want him to quit?” Naomi asked, coming up to the side of the bed and dropping a kiss on the side of my head.

Ryan nodded but sighed. “Yeah. But he’s worried about what will happen if he does. He’s scared Damian will kill us to punish him.”

“He will!” I exclaimed, crossing my arms over my chest, ignoring the sting of my brand. Vox scoffed and rolled his eyes, shaking his head as if echoing Ryan’s earlier sentiment.

He can fucking try.

I met my friend's silver eyes and found him smirking at me. There was a challenge there. The same sparkling challenge that we've used on each other since we were kids.

Come on, Cal. Don't be a pussy. Let's fuck shit up together. Like old times.

I could literally *hear* his thoughts as if he had spoken them out loud.

"We all want you to quit, Cal," Naomi said. "Damian can suck it."

"Gnomes... if something were to happen to you because of me..." I swallowed, but Cass stepped forward, her mouth in a firm line.

"Cal. Enough. We will all protect Naomi together."

"I don't want that responsibility to fall on you, Cass," I whispered, and she rolled her eyes.

"*Please.* Sometimes, I think you've convinced yourself that you *actually* killed our mom."

Anxiety spiked through my chest at the brazen way she just admitted that out loud. I glanced nervously at Ryan, who looked just as shocked as I expected.

"He didn't?" he asked.

Cass chuckled. "Nope. That was all me. I slit that bitch's throat and never lost a wink of sleep over it. Cal lied to try and keep me out of trouble. He was so covered in blood that no one believed me when I told them I did it."

Cass turned back to look at me. "Stop acting like it's your job to keep us all safe, Callum. It's *our* job to protect *each other*. And if I need to slit that twat waffle's throat to keep him from hurting you, then so be it. You're done with Apex. We'll deal with what comes *together*."

"Damn, princess," Theo murmured from where she was leaning against the bedpost, her hands jammed in her pockets. "That's hot."

Cass's lip twitched, and if I didn't know any better, I would say her cheeks turned a little pink.

I eyed Theo critically. "What about you? You can't be thrilled that I just busted into your brother's life and put all of you in danger like this."

Theo looked at me, her lips pursing in thought for a moment before she glanced back at Iris. Iris gave her daughter a gentle smile, and Theo sighed before cutting me another piercing glare.

“You’re Ryan’s person, which means you’re family now. We don’t turn our backs on family.”

My throat completely closed up, and the burning in my eyes came to a head. A hot tear slid down my cheek without my permission, but it didn’t get far.

Ryan cupped my face in his hands and gently kissed the wetness away.
Right in front of fucking everyone.

“See, angel? You’re not alone. We’re all in this together. Stay here with us. Tell Damian you’re done, and let me take care of you.”

I blinked at this amazing man who, barely a month ago, had been screaming at me to get out of his life. He was now telling me he was willing to *risk* that life so I could stay here with him.

“Let’s give them some privacy,” Iris whispered, and everyone filed out of the room, leaving me alone with my ginger snap.

He grinned at me and made a waving motion with his hand.

“Scootch over; your breakfast is getting cold. If you don’t dig in soon, I’m going to have to spoon-feed you.”

I choked on a laugh but did as he said and carefully slid over to make room for him while doing my best not to topple anything over on the tray.

“You’re being pretty bossy. When I’m all healed up, I’m going to have to fuck you back into submission. You know that, right?”

Ryan’s eyes glittered with a sort of heated amusement, and he grinned at me.

“You have *no idea* how much I’m looking forward to that.” He hummed, and my cock twitched between my legs at the huskiness in his voice.

“Better eat and get your strength up so you can teach me a lesson.” He winked, and I couldn’t help the low rumble that rolled through my chest.

“Careful, ginger snap. You keep saying shit like that, and I’m gonna end up ripping a stitch.”

He laughed and leaned forward, kissing me gently on the lips.

“Eat your breakfast, you psycho,” he murmured against me, and I sighed into his mouth.

As terrified as I was that this was a horrible mistake that was going to blow up in my face, I wasn’t strong enough to fight it anymore.

For the first time since that day in the precinct at ten years old, I allowed myself to share the load.

I let Ryan convince me that we were all going to be okay, and I leaned into the safety his promises offered me.

Maybe, just this one time, it was okay for me to be selfish.

Just this once...

OceanofPDF.com

68



Cal Walker

Alexa, play: Medicine - Daughter

I fell asleep almost immediately after eating. My body felt like it was made of lead and sharp pieces of glass. Everything was heavy, and I hurt, but I was almost too tired to care about it. As I drifted in and out of sleep, I was vaguely aware of Ryan coming in to check on me. Around what felt like mid-day, he woke me up, telling me I needed to eat again.

I managed to eat the soup he brought me and gulped down some more pills. T3s and an antibiotic, he told me.

I think I asked him what the antibiotic was for, but my eyes were so heavy, and I felt so warm and safe with him stroking my hair beside me that I didn't hear him answer. Before I knew it, I had passed out again, snuggled into Ryan's cool silk sheets with his fingers stroking through my hair.



I WOKE UP IN THE TUB.

Frowning, I jerked my chains, panic rising into my chest.

No, no, no... How did I get here? I was just with Ryan!

"Mr. Walker." Fear shot through my veins as I raised my eyes to see Damian sitting on the edge of the tub, looking down at me with that sadistic look he always seemed to get in his eyes when he was about to hurt me.

My lip trembled, and my throat suddenly had a lump in it.

"*Please*, Damian. Don't hurt me again," I whimpered. My voice was much higher than normal. I looked down at my hands and jerked in surprise when I realized how small they were.

Was this a dream? Or a memory?

"Mr. Walker, you know this type of behavior can't go unpunished."

"But she was innocent! She didn't do anything. I don't want to kill innocent people, Damian," I protested; tears were streaming down my face now as I remembered the woman on her knees before me, begging me to spare her life while Damian watched me hold a gun to her head.

He grabbed my face so hard it hurt, and I cried out.

"That's not for you to decide, is it, Callum?" He snarled inches from my face. I tried to curl away from him, sobbing.

He struck me across the face so hard I saw stars, which only made me cry harder.

"Big boys don't cry! You're a mercenary, Callum. It's time you start acting like it."

I heard a buzzing noise, and one of Damian's goons came in with a long black stick that was sparking at the end. I didn't know what it was, but I didn't like it.

"Now, Mr. McGregor is going to hurt you, and you're going to take it until you learn how to control yourself. Do you understand?"

"No... please no..." I sobbed, covering my face with my tiny hands and cowering in the bottom of the tub.

My pleas did nothing to stop them. I closed my eyes so I wouldn't see the first blow coming. When McGregor rammed it into my side, I screamed so loud my voice broke like it was made of hard plastic.

There was the soft tink and chime of a belt being undone, though I barely heard it over my screams.

“Again,” Damiam grunted, and it sounded like he ripped open a zipper as he spoke. I curled deeper into myself, tensing in anticipation of the horrible electric shock that I knew was coming.

The second blow was even worse than the first. My voice cracked and broke until my screams were nearly silent.

All I could hear was a strange grunting sound coming from Damian as he watched his goon strike me again and again with the prodder. I didn’t know what Damian was doing, but something told me I didn’t want to see. So I kept my face hidden and pretended I couldn’t hear the fleshy sounds and the soft, ragged breaths that felt out of place in this horrible, damp, concrete room.

Was I going to die like this? I wondered as another blow connected with my ribs.

“That’s it, Mr. Walker. Take your punishment.” Damian panted. The fleshy slapping sound increased in intensity.

“Callum!”

I couldn’t die like this... not without saying goodbye to... someone.

“Cal! Angel! Wake up! You’re dreaming!”

Someone was shaking me. I groaned and pulled away.

“No, please... no more. Don’t hurt me again. I’ll be good, I’ll do better...”

“CALLUM!”

The voice roared, and suddenly, my eyes flew open. I didn’t know where the fuck I was, but my whole body was alight with pain, and I was gasping with anxiety.

There was someone shaking me. It was dark, and I was hurt.

I snarled and attacked.

I was an adult again, so it was easy to wrap my hand around the throat of the man who was threatening me. I flipped him beneath me, ignoring the screaming wave of agony that ripped through my side with the effort.

“Callum, stop, it’s just me!” The man was screaming, but I straddled his chest, crushing him down into the bed by the throat.

“You think you can fucking touch me and live? I’ll fucking kill you!” I roared, wrapping my other hand around the monster’s throat. I began to squeeze as my attacker choked and thrashed beneath me.

He clawed at my wrists, and his eyes rolled back into his head as I strangled the life out of him.

'Die, die, die!' my mind chanted.

Eliminate the threat! Kill the target!

Kill, Kill, Kill!

Kill him, then you can rest.

No one can hurt you if you kill him.

"A-angel—" The monster coughed.

Wait.

Angel?

That word rattled through my triggered mind, and I froze.

Angel... Angel. Only one person had ever called me that before.

The inky black fog that had completely melted my brain began to recede, and my racing heart skipped a beat as I realized who it was I was trying to strangle to death.

It was Ryan...

"G-ginger snap?" I rasped, and despite the fact that his face was beet red and it looked like I had popped a blood vessel in his right eye, he smiled at me.

"Yeah, baby. It's me. It's your ginger snap. You're safe now. Let me go, please."

I launched myself off of him, not caring that the stitches in my side definitely tore with the movement.

"Fuck, Ryan, I'm so sorry... I..." Stumbling toward the door, my vision blurred.

Holy fucking shit... I had almost just killed him! I almost just killed my ginger boy...

My hands were shaking. I couldn't get them to stop, and my stomach hurt. Not just from the bullet wound, I felt like I was going to throw up.

The blood drained from my face, and my mouth flooded with bile. Yeah... definitely going to throw up...

I needed to get the fuck out of here...

But as much as my mind was screaming at me to get away from Ryan in case I hurt him again, my body wouldn't cooperate.

I fell to my hands and knees, and a strange sound ripped from my throat. It sounded suspiciously like a sob, but that didn't make any sense.

I didn't cry.

I was a mercenary. Mercenaries didn't cry.

A cold sweat broke out over my skin, and I heaved, doing my best to force the vomit down, but I couldn't stop it. I puked all over the floor. Before I could try to apologize again, Ryan was kneeling next to me, his large, warm hand rubbing down my sweat-slicked back in soft, soothing motions.

"Shhh, it's okay, angel. Don't apologize. You're safe. I've got you," he murmured.

I heaved again, but thankfully, I didn't seem to have anything left in my stomach to puke up. Turning away from my sick, I looked at Ryan, my heart breaking as I took in the ring of bruises already forming around his neck and the way the white in his right eye was full of blood.

I did that to him... I hurt my baby...

"I should go. I didn't mean to... Ryan, I'm so sorry." My voice was a croak. It was rough from being sick and maybe screaming, but there was also a painful lump in my throat that no matter how many times I swallowed, wouldn't go away.

"I can't stay here..." I muttered, trying to get to my feet, but Ryan wrapped his arms around me and crushed me against him. I winced as his arms jostled my wound, which was bleeding again, but I didn't have the strength to pull away.

I was so tired.

"You're not going anywhere, angel. Come on, let's get you back in bed."

I shook my head against his shoulder, biting back what I was almost positive was a sob.

"No. I just almost killed you in my sleep, Ryan. We can't sleep in the same bed."

He chuckled and tugged me to my feet, positioning my body so I could lean on him.

"I'll admit, I wasn't expecting you to try to off me for trying to wake you up from a nightmare, but now I know better. It'll just be a bit of a learning curve, baby. We'll figure it out. Do you have nightmares often?"

"Yeah, I—" I paused as I took a minute to process his words. "Wait... did you just call me *baby*?" I asked, completely flabbergasted.

He smiled at me as he steered me back into bed.

"Yeah. Is that okay?"

I gaped at him.

Was that okay!?

I swallowed and nodded.

“Of course it’s okay, ginger snap.”

He beamed at me and gave me a kiss on the forehead as he settled me on the edge of the mattress.

“I’m going to clean this up.” He gestured back to where I had been sick on the floor. “And I’ll bring you a toothbrush and a cup of water. Here, you can rinse and spit in this cup you used earlier to take your pills...” He was already in what I was now affectionately calling ‘*Ryan Mode*.’ It was this no-nonsense, straight-to-business persona that he seemed to fall into when there were tasks that needed to get done.

When he was like this, he wouldn’t stop until his checklist was complete, and I knew there was no fighting it.

“I can walk to the bathroom, you know...”

He shot me a withering glare and nearly *snarled*.

“You will do no such thing. You definitely tore a stitch, if not while you were suffering through that PTSD response, then you definitely did when you tried to bolt for the door. I’m going to have to get Dr. Callahan in here to check you out...”

“Dr. Callahan?” I asked, cocking my head to the side.

Ryan bustled into the hall and reappeared with paper towels and a mop.

I watched him get to work cleaning up my mess, and he nodded.

“Yeah, he’s a doctor Cass knows. You owe him your life. He’s the one who patched you up.”

Huh. Interesting.

“I thought *you* patched me up, ginger snap.” I smirked at him as he finished up and brought me a toothbrush with some paste already squeezed on it. I got to work brushing my teeth while he shrugged.

“I just kept you alive until he got here.”

Spitting out my toothpaste into the cup Ryan had instructed me to use, I cocked my head to the side.

“*Just* kept me alive until he got here?” I reached out and brushed a strand of ginger hair out of his gorgeous, brandy eyes. “That sounds pretty heroic to me, baby.”

Tugging him down to sit next to me on the bed, I gave him a gentle smile, which he returned with one of his soft, pink blushes. Leaning

forward, I kissed his warm cheek gently, rubbing my thumb along his jaw and reveling in the rough bristle of stubble that was already growing there.

His clean scent surrounded me, and I leaned into him, depositing the cup and toothbrush on the end table as I worked him closer to the mattress.

"I'm so sorry I hurt you, baby. You have no idea. You're the last person on the planet that I would ever want to hurt."

"Shh, shh." Ryan kissed me back, nipping at my lips until they became puffy and swollen. He ran his fingers up the back of my neck and into my hair, causing me to shudder as I lay on top of him, pressing him into the soft mattress.

"It's not your fault, angel. It was a PTSD response."

I broke the kiss and pressed my forehead into his, letting out a shaky breath as I crushed my eyes closed with regret.

"I'm sorry I'm so fucked up," I whispered, and he swept his thumb over my cheek, wiping away something wet that I pretended wasn't a tear.

"You're not fucked up, Callum. What happened to you is fucked up, yes... but you're safe now. We'll work through it together."

I huffed out what I think was supposed to be a laugh but somehow wasn't. Wincing against the pain in my side, I sat up, straddling Ryan's hips and looking down at him with regret.

"How can I sleep here knowing I might hurt you again?" I whispered, and he got up on his elbows, pursing his lips.

"Now that we know, we'll take precautions. Do you have night terrors often?"

I nodded. "Yeah. That's why I used to always sleep at Apex instead of at home with Naomi. My screams always woke her up."

Ryan's eyes darkened. He didn't like that.

Reaching up with one hand, he gently ran a thumb over my kiss-swollen lips.

"From now on, you will sleep here, in the same bed as me. That is not up for debate," he said, using his stern businessman voice. I raised an eyebrow at that.

If I wasn't so afraid I might accidentally kill him in a triggered rage, I would have found his little power trip adorable.

"If I agree to stay here, you have to promise not to wake me up again if I have a nightmare. I'm serious, Ryan." I dropped my hand to gently trace

the already purpling bruise around his throat. "If I hurt you again, I don't think I could ever forgive myself."

"I'm not letting you suffer through a fucking night terror while I sit here and do nothing, Callum," he snapped. "I'll wake you up with an air horn from across the room if I have to, but I'm not letting that fucker ever touch you again. Not even in your dreams."

My eyebrows shot up into my hairline at his tone.

He sounded *angry*.

"How do you know the dream was about him?" I whispered, and Ryan gave a '*is that a serious question?*' look.

"Who else would it be about? That man has been torturing and brainwashing you since you were a child. Of course your nightmares are about him."

I bit my lip, feeling exposed. I had never talked about my nightmares before... Hell, no one had ever *asked* about them before, let alone had a theory on what they were about or why I had them.

"They used to be about my mom," I admitted. I didn't dream of Damian often; this was the first time he'd made an appearance in a while. But I guess it made sense, considering recent events.

"This one was more like a memory from when I was a kid. He had me in the tub, and... it was the first time they used the cattle prod on me," I whispered, shocking myself by telling him the truth.

Understanding crossed Ryan's face, and he pushed up from his elbows onto his hands so he could sit up straighter. I shimmied down his lap to give him more room.

"So that's why you were afraid of the tub..." he muttered to himself, and I frowned.

"What do you mean?"

He glanced at me, his mouth a firm line. "The other night, after your surgery, I was trying to get you cleaned up, but you refused to go anywhere near the bathtub.

"Oh..." I wrung my hands together in my lap, feeling really awkward and uncomfortable talking about this. "Yeah. Most of the torture happens in a bathtub in the basement of Apex. It's so they can use water torture methods. A lot of pressure washing and waterboarding, and it makes the cattle prod hurt more if you're wet first."

Ryan's face was white, and his fists were clenched in the blankets on each side of his body. I reached out and touched one of his fists in an effort to comfort him.

"It's not that bad, baby. Nothing I can't handle."

A vein was pulsing in Ryan's forehead.

"Not that bad? Cal, you're talking about fucking *torture*. It's bad... Why was he torturing you in this dream?"

I winced. He already looked like he wanted to kill someone. I didn't think hearing the rest of my dream was going to help at all.

Seeming to understand why I was hesitating, he forced himself to relax, slid his hand up my chest, and cupped his hand around my nape.

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to, but I think talking about it will help. It might make it easier to sleep if you let the nightmares out of your head and into the open," he murmured. Taking a shaky breath, I nodded.

I could do this. I could tell Ryan the truth.

"It was one of the first missions he sent me on where the victim wasn't a killer themselves. She was... just a regular woman. She'd divorced a powerful man, and it pissed him off that she wanted to leave him, so he hired Apex to kill her. Damian chose me for the job."

I closed my eyes and forced myself to breathe through the guilt that was humming through my body. This was why I never asked questions when taking out marks. I didn't want to know what they did or didn't do to end up on my list.

This woman was my first lesson in that respect. I hadn't thought of her in years... If I was being honest with myself, I think my mind repressed the memory.

"The way she begged me not to kill her..." My eyes flew open and met Ryan's brandy gaze. I was expecting him to be looking at me like I was some kind of monster. But he wasn't. There was nothing but compassion and... something else I couldn't put my finger on... but it was nice.

"I didn't want to kill her." I choked, and Ryan squeezed my hand gently, refusing to look anywhere but my face. "When I told Damian I couldn't do it, he shot her in the face right in front of me, then he chained me to the bathtub for almost two weeks as punishment. It was the first time I had to suffer through recalibration."

We stared at each other in the dark for several beats. I held my breath and waited for the outrage to come. I waited for him to tell me I was the devil, and he thought I was a *disgusting*, evil thing that killed innocent people.

Instead, he did something strange.

He glanced over my shoulder, and he seemed so focused that I glanced back to see if there was someone there—there wasn't; the room was empty.

He smiled at me and brought my knuckles to his lips, leaving a gentle kiss on my hand.

"If she were here right now, she would want you to know that she forgives you, and she would want you to know that what happened wasn't your fault. You were just a little boy. Damian is to blame," Ryan said, and my lower lip trembled.

"You can't know that..."

Ryan gave me a strange, sad smile and kissed my fingers again. "Sure I do. I have a sense about these things." He winked. Ignoring my baffled expression, he tapped me on the hip and jerked his head to the side.

"Lie down, angel," he whispered. Feeling like I was in some sort of dream or alternate reality, I slid off his legs and lay down on my back next to him.

He slipped under my arm and rested his head on my chest, tangling his legs with mine.

"You're never going back there," he whispered, kissing me gently on my peck, right over the bandaid that covered up my brand.

"We'll see." I hummed, feeling choked up and *so fucking lucky* to have this perfect man cuddled up in my arms.

"No, Callum. You are *never* going back there. I will kill him myself if I have to," he growled, causing me to let out a low chuckle as I stroked his soft, citrus-scented hair. I placed a kiss on the top of his head and squeezed him tighter against me.

"My brave, brave, ginger snap." I smiled as my eyes fluttered closed.

"I'm serious, Cal. I won't let him hurt you. You're safe now."

Ryan's words floated around me like feathers on a balmy summer breeze. Even though I knew he couldn't protect me from the demons that held my chains, it was nice to have someone care about me enough to want to try.

OceanofPDF.com

69



Ryan Fairview

I listened to Cal's breathing level out, and his heartbeat slowed down as he fell back asleep. There was no way I would be sleeping tonight. Not with the insane amount of rage that was coursing through my veins.

I'd done my best to keep my cool while Cal opened up to me about some of the trauma that ass fuck had inflicted on him as a child, but I needed to fucking hit something.

The ghost of the woman Cal had told me about was lingering in the doorway to my room. She couldn't come much closer due to Cal's charm, which currently rested on the end table.

The top of her skull was missing from where Damian had shot her, but from the nose down, her head was intact.

I appreciated that she had felt the need to tell Callum that she didn't blame him for what happened despite how gruesome her demise had been.

'He really tried to say no,' she whispered as I gently untangled myself from Cal's sleeping form.

"I know." I sighed.

‘The others... they’re not as forgiving. He was older then and stopped resisting Damian after a while.’

A low growl built in my chest as I slipped past the ghost and into the hallway.

“He was brainwashed. It still wasn’t his fault. Damian was threatening to kill his sisters if he didn’t comply,” I snapped at the phantom as I jogged down the stairs. She nodded the half of her head that was still attached to her neck and floated after me.

‘I know. But that woman... She has them convinced that he’s evil. She calls him the devil.’

“Yeah well. She can get *fucked*. She’s the evil one, and if she wasn’t already dead, I would kill her myself for what she did to him.”

That was the second time that night I had threatened to kill someone. I’d never made a threat like that in my life. At least not seriously. But as the words left my mouth, I knew they were true.

I felt possessive and protective of Cal in a way I never had before. Not even for my own family. Seeing him on his hands and knees, being sick from how much trauma he’d been put through, made me see fucking red.

I needed to learn how to protect him. I promised him I wouldn’t let Damian hurt him again, and until I knew how to properly handle a weapon, that promise was an empty one.

I was stalking toward the basement, thinking about how I was going to learn how to shoot a gun while we were all on lockdown in Fairview when I noticed Vox was still up as well. He was sitting on the couch in the living room with his laptop open on the coffee table in front of him.

The blue-white light from the screen lit up his angular face and ice-white hair in the otherwise dimly lit room. He glanced up at me as I approached, raising a dark eyebrow as if to ask, *‘What are you doing up?’*

The more time I spent with him, the easier it was to read him, and we were able to communicate somehow without him saying a word.

“Couldn’t sleep. Cal had a night terror.” I grunted, not bothering to hide how pissed off I was.

Vox’s lips pursed in understanding, and he nodded knowingly. He gave me a questioning ‘thumbs up,’ which I intuitively knew was his way of asking if he was okay.

I sighed. “He’s asleep now. But no. He’s not okay.” I gestured to my throat, which still hurt from the way he had tried to strangle me when I

woke him up.

"I woke him up, and he had a PTSD response. He tried to kill me." The statement came out flat and emotionless. I didn't tell Vox how close he had come to succeeding. There was a moment there when I truly thought I was going to die. However, the strange thing was, I hadn't been worried about what would happen to *me* if he didn't let go.

I had been worried about what accidentally killing me would do to Cal's already frazzled mind. He would have never forgiven himself, and for some reason, I cared about that more than my own safety.

Vox frowned and tapped his cheek under his eye, then pointed to me. He was asking me what happened to my face.

Frowning, I glanced at my reflection on the TV and nearly jumped when I saw that a blood vessel had popped in my eye. It was all red and looked pretty gruesome.

"Fuck. He got me good," I muttered, pulling down the skin on my cheek to get a better look. Well, at least I didn't have to worry about scaring guests at services.

I'd needed to temporarily shut down Fairview until we figured out what we were going to do about Damian. Vox suspected that Damian was going to make a move against us, and he didn't feel like it was a good idea to let strangers into the house until we were able to neutralize him as a threat.

As anxious as it made me to shut down my father's business, it was worth it to protect Cal. I was quickly realizing there wasn't much I wouldn't do for my goofy psycho. I wasn't sure when the change had happened, but he was mine, and all the worries I had before about my sexuality now felt silly and shallow.

This was life or fucking death, and the man that I was slowly falling for was at risk. I wouldn't fucking stand for it.

I turned to Vox.

"I need you to keep teaching me how to shoot."

He raised an eyebrow, and his mouth cocked up at the side.

I'd impressed him. He liked that.

"Is there a way you can teach me without us leaving Fairview?"

Vox nodded and reached behind him, pulling his handgun out from his waistband before unloading it on the coffee table in front of him. I watched him expertly disarm the weapon before snapping all the pieces back into place and handing it to me.

“You want me to practice without any bullets? What good does that do?” I wondered out loud, and Vox held up a finger before typing on his laptop. He turned the screen to face me, and I glanced down to see what he was showing me.

He’d pulled up an article titled: *Why Dry Fire Practice is Important*.

Dry firing apparently was learning to use a gun without ammo and helped you improve things like trigger control and sight alignment.

“Great.” I grinned, glancing at Vox, who was smirking at me like the sly fox he was. “You wanna come help me practice for a bit? I’m too wound up to sleep.”

He nodded and stood up, hiking up his black jeans as he moved.

“Let’s practice in the gym,” I said, leading him toward the basement. “Maybe we can spar a bit too.”

Vox let out a silent puff of air that I now knew was his version of a chuckle.

I grinned over my shoulder at him.

“I know, I know. You guys have corrupted me.”

Vox was full-blown grinning now, but beneath the warm amusement that swam in his silver eyes, there was an undercurrent of respect there, too.

He was glad I was taking these measures into my own hands, and something about winning the approval of Cal’s best friend felt precious and special.

I made a promise right then and there to myself that I would never do anything to fuck up the trust I had earned from either of them.

I was in this now, and there was no going back.

70



Ryan Fairview

I practiced dry firing with Vox until the wee hours of the morning. By the time we finished, I was exhausted, and my head was swimming with everything I learned.

Learning to shoot a gun properly was way more complicated than just pulling the trigger. There were all kinds of minute, tiny movements, motions, and weight placement that I'd never known about. The smallest mistake could throw your aim totally off.

To make things even more challenging, Vox needed to teach me all this primarily through touch. So, needless to say, I had more than a few nights of practice in my future before I could ever be considered good enough to be of any help.

Cal, thankfully, was still sleeping peacefully when I fell into bed next to him, and when I got up a few short hours later to get in touch with Dr. Callahan, he barely budged.

I needed to wake him up when Tom arrived, and I attributed the fact that he was still half asleep to his particularly grumpy mood toward the good

doctor.

“Cal, wake up. Dr. Callahan is here to check out your stitches,” I whispered in his ear. I stroked my fingers through his thick, dark hair and left soft kisses on his stubbly jawline, doing my best to wake him up as gently as possible.

I didn’t think he was at risk of attacking me if he wasn’t actively having a night terror, but I wanted to be careful, just in case.

Cal’s dark lashes fluttered on his cheeks, and he smiled, his warm brown eyes zeroing in on my face.

“Mmm. Morning, ginger snap,” he purred, sitting up to stretch. “I could get used to your gorgeous face being the first thing I see in the morning.”

I grinned at him as he yawned. “Likewise, baby.”

His sleepy smile stretched wider at my use of the word ‘*baby*’ but immediately slipped off his face when his gaze finally landed on Tom Callahan.

“Who the fuck is that?” he snapped, and I raised my eyebrows in surprise.

“This is Dr. Callahan. Remember I told you about him? He’s here to check on your stitches.”

Cal’s eyes narrowed, and his gaze darted back and forth between Tom and me.

“You look a little young to be a doctor,” he snarked. He reached for my hand and tugged me closer to the bed, his brown eyes taking on that scary, dead look he got when he slipped into his *killer* persona.

Tom chuckled and scratched the back of his neck awkwardly.

“Yeah, I get that a lot. I assure you, I’m fully capable of treating you. I’m in my third year of residency.”

“Dr. Callahan saved your life, angel. You wouldn’t be here right now if it wasn’t for him.”

Cal scoffed and tugged on my hand again, almost as if he were trying to get in front of me, which was impossible considering he was in bed and I was standing next to him.

“Why are you being like this?” I asked, confused. “He’s here to help you.”

Cal shot me a dark look and scowled.

“Sure he’s not here to help himself?” He snapped his gaze back to Tom, whose lip was twitching in amusement. “I’m fine now. I don’t need a

doctor. He's probably using me as an excuse to see *you*."

I barked out a laugh. "W-what?"

Cal's lip curled. "You heard me. Well, guess what, Do0gie Howser? He's taken. So why don't you pack up your little playthings and get the fuck out of here."

I slipped a hand over his forehead, unable to keep the amusement out of my voice. "Maybe we need to cut back on the T3s. The drugs have clearly gone to your head. You're being ridiculous."

"Am I? Look at him! Doctor's are only that hot in porn! I may be injured, but I'll be *damned* if I let you play *check-up* with my ginger snap." He snarled.

Both Tom and I were laughing now, which only seemed to make Cal even more grumpy.

"I assure you, I am not here to make a move on your man, Mr. Walker." Dr. Callahan chuckled. "Ryan called me because, apparently, you tore a few stitches last night. I'm here to take a look."

Cal's expression was murderous, and as entertaining as it was that he seemed to be this jealous over a *doctor*, I needed him to let Tom do his job.

I tugged on Cal's hand and pinched his chin between my fingers, turning him to face me.

"Let the doctor check you out, baby. Please. I'll be right over there. As soon as he's done, he'll leave, and it'll be just me and you again, I promise."

Cal narrowed his eyes but nodded.

"Fine," he conceded, and I gave him a kiss on the lips as a thank you.

Well, that was a mistake.

Cal slid his hand around my neck and forced his tongue into my mouth, causing me to let out a surprised '*hmmph!*'

He stroked the inside of my mouth like he owned me before sucking my tongue so forcefully into his mouth that it hurt.

"Cal!" I tried to exclaim as he turned his sucking treatment to my bottom lip, biting down on it hard enough that I worried it would bruise. I pushed him back, my face flushed red with embarrassment, but he was grinning at the doctor now like some sort of mischievous little imp.

Thankfully, Tom didn't seem bothered by Cal's aggressive display of ownership. His mouth was still quivering at the side in amusement.

“Well. I suppose you’re going to want an estimation of when you can get back into your, ‘ahem’ *active lifestyle*.” He chuckled as he approached the bed, and I moved away. “I can’t think of a more inconvenient time than the honeymoon stage to have to heal a bullet wound,” he joked, and I frowned.

“What do you mean?” I asked, and he glanced over his shoulder as he opened his medical kit and started setting up his tools.

“Depending on how his healing goes, he won’t be able to participate in any strenuous activities for several weeks.”

“What!?” Cal choked. The glare he gave Dr. Callahan could have killed a houseplant.

“What the fuck does that mean... Does that mean no sex!?”

“Afraid not,” Tom said as he prepared a needle with what I assumed was a general anesthetic.

Cal gaped at him before whipping to face me.

“See! He’s trying to get me out of the picture so he can make a move on you!”

“Callum. Stop it,” I snapped, suddenly no longer amused. I was having flashbacks to when my father had been diagnosed with his heart condition.

His doctor also said to make sure he didn’t do anything strenuous. Clearly, we hadn’t taken his orders seriously enough.

My gut churned with unease as I watched Cal fire snarky barbs at Dr. Callahan while he injected the anesthetic next to his bullet wound. I remembered the day I found Cal helping that young girl process her grief on the bench in the garden. He’d reminded me so much of my father...

My blood ran cold at the possibility of history repeating itself, and my entire body locked up with anxiety.

I made a mental note to get detailed notes from Dr. Callahan on *exactly* what Cal could and couldn’t do while he was in recovery.

Watching my beautiful psycho fight the doctor at every turn, I knew I had my work cut out for me. But I refused to lose another person I loved to something like a health complication. Not if I could avoid it.

Wait.

Someone I loved?

Still watching Cal grumpily interact with the amused physician, the anxiety in my chest increased by several degrees at the thought.

Did I love Cal?

Did I even know what love was? I had never been in a relationship before... I didn't even know if we were officially dating!

I bit my lip, purposely slowing my breathing down to prevent what felt like an impending panic attack.

I couldn't *love* someone that was so fucking high risk. I couldn't live through losing someone like that again.

Once was enough...

But when Cal turned those gorgeous brown eyes on me, all my reasons for pushing this feeling away disappeared.

His expression changed from annoyance to concern the moment he noticed that I was upset.

"You okay, ginger snap?" he asked, his tone suddenly soft and tender. The now aching familiar and comforting sound of his voice rolled over me, and I realized I didn't really have a choice.

The damage was done.

I was in love with this beautiful, dark, broken angel that had forced his way into my life, and there was no going back now.

The only thing I could do was try to keep him alive.

And that was what I was going to fucking do.



Cal

YOU WOULD THINK A TERM LIKE *BED* REST WOULD BE MORE FUN. TURNS out, there was less stress on *bed* and more stress on *rest*... and it was *boring*.

Also, my new arch nemesis, Dr. Callahan, relentlessly reminded Ryan that I was still not ready for any '*strenuous activity*' every time he came by. Which really was just code for no sex.

Ryan wouldn't even let me fucking *blow him*! It was complete bullshit. Almost two weeks had passed before Ryan even let me get up and walk around the house. He brought me a wheelchair which I threatened to douse with gasoline if he didn't get it the fuck away from me, so we settled on a

single crutch, despite the fact that it made me feel like a fucking hobbling knob.

“Come on, there’s nothing hot about crutches, ginger snap. Couldn’t you get me a boss-ass cane? One with, like, a wolf head handle that hides a secret knife or some shit?” I asked at the end of my second week, practically locked in Ryan’s room. Lex Luthor, *ahem*, I mean *Dr. Callahan*, had finally given me the green light to have free range of Fairview. I’d been allowed doctor-mandated walks up and down the hall for the last week, but they were always supervised, and no stairs were allowed.

Healing *sucked*.

Ryan handed me a Skrillex T-shirt, and I pulled it roughly over my head. I was feeling *a lot* better, which wasn’t helping with my boredom. This was the longest I had gone in my adult life without murdering or fucking someone, and I was losing my damn mind.

Especially considering I felt like I was more than healed enough to fuck, or at the very least eat out Ryan’s perfect freckled ass.

My bullet wound still hurt if I twisted in certain directions or if I pressed on it, but the constant dull throb was nearly gone. The brand was doing even better. After a few days of antibiotics, the excruciatingly hot sting of pain I had been suffering dwindled and died. It had blistered over in the first week, and now it was just an ugly fucking scab of Damian’s initials. I hated looking at it. Once it was fully healed, I planned to find a way to cover it up with ink somehow.

“You have a phone and an Amazon account, Callum. Order yourself whatever you want,” Ryan muttered absently as he dug around through the trunk at the end of the bed for a pair of pants for me to wear.

Vox brought all my shit from my old house, considering Naomi and I couldn’t live there anymore. Ryan had immediately dragged an antique trunk in here to store all my things.

I’d watched him fold my clothes for over an hour and diligently put my things away. His little disgusted scoff every time he found a wrinkled T-shirt amused me to no end. It took him forever to get my shit in the trunk because he insisted on using his tiny handheld steamer to iron every single piece of clothing before neatly putting it away.

“No *thank you*,” I grumbled. Ryan knew I wouldn’t look at my phone. He’d been trying to get me to check it for days, telling me I needed to rip the bandaid off and message Damian myself.

But I couldn't. I knew if I checked my messages and Damian had sent threats against Ryan, I wouldn't be able to stop myself from returning to Apex. It was easier to pretend there were no threats or messages.

The unread messages that Ryan had sent me when I was being tortured were another reason my gut swirled with anxiety when I thought about checking my phone. I was sure they would break my fucking heart, and I just wasn't ready for any of that.

I wanted to pretend none of this was happening and bury my face in his ass to make up for being mean to him, but the stubborn fucker wouldn't let me anywhere near him. Not until I was *healed*. Which is the only reason I was listening to any of his stupid fucking rules.

"Well, then I guess the crutch will have to do for now." He smirked at me, handing me a pair of shredded black jeans. Sitting on the edge of the bed, I pulled them on, batting his hands away when he tried to help me. I scowled at him as I did up the button and gingerly got to my feet.

"When I'm healed, you're going to get fucked so hard you won't be able to sit for a week," I threatened, and Ryan snickered.

"Promises, promises," he chirped, handing me the shitty crutch. Giving him my grumpiest look, I snatched it out of his hands and tucked it under my arm. I would never admit it to him, but it *did* make it a little easier to walk.

It was slow going, but we made our way down to the kitchen, where the whole gang was hanging out. We were using Fairview as a sort of base until I was healed enough to help Vox figure out what to do about Damian. This meant that there hadn't been any funeral services for two weeks, and Cassandra had been forced to take a vacation for the first time since she started her career as a lawyer. Vox was sprawled out at the kitchen table with his laptop in his lap. He didn't even look up as we entered, as his computer screen seemed to be commanding one hundred percent of his attention.

Naomi was helping Iris with breakfast, and Cass and Theo were bickering by the coffee machine.

Jeez, it was a full house.

Naomi was the first to notice I had joined the land of the living, and she beamed at me as she whisked eggs in a stainless steel mixing bowl.

"Cal! You're out of bed!" She beamed, and I nodded, slipping into a chair next to Vox. I leaned the stupid crutch against the table and sighed.

“Yeah. Out of bed but still under fucking *house arrest*.” I scowled at Ryan, who just gave me his usual smirk that he used whenever I complained about being bored.

“Come on, it’s not that bad,” Cass said, rolling her eyes and distancing herself from Theo.

“Not that bad!?” I growled. “I haven’t murdered or fucked anything in two weeks! *Two weeks*, Cassandra!”

She made a face and raised her coffee cup to her perfectly painted lips.

“Okay, I don’t need to hear about how blue your fucking balls are, little brother,” she grumbled, taking a sip of her drink.

Ryan came to stand beside me, running his fingers through my hair gently.

“Come on, angel, I refuse to believe those are your only two speeds. There must be something else we can do to keep you busy while you’re on the mend.”

The way his fingers brushed against my scalp was doing nothing to get my mind off sex. My dick tented in my pants as he scraped his blunt fingernails down the back of my head, and I nearly purred out loud at how fucking good it felt.

“Keep doing that, ginger snap, and both our families are going to find out real fucking fast exactly what speed I run at.”

“Callum!” Naomi and Cass simultaneously exclaimed while Theo and Vox both snickered.

Chuckling in amusement, Ryan pinched my chin between his fingers and tilted my head up so he could brush a kiss over my lips.

“If you can hold out just a little bit longer, I promise to make it worth your while,” he murmured against my mouth.

Wrapping my hand around his nape and pulling him closer, I rubbed the tip of my nose against his.

“Yeah?” I hummed, kissing his soft lips and resisting the overwhelming urge to shove my tongue into his hot mouth and devour him whole.

“Yeah, baby. I promise.”

I groaned into his mouth.

“*Fuck*, I’m never going to get tired of hearing you say that,” I whispered, and he cocked his head to the side, his brandy eyes shining.

“Say what? *Baby*?” he teased, and I swallowed, nodding at him.

Curling my fingers deeper into his soft ginger locks, I pressed his forehead against mine, nearly shivering with the rush of dopamine that was suddenly pumping through my entire body.

“Say it again,” I ordered, and he smiled and gave me one more chaste kiss before pulling away.

“Maybe later... *baby*.” He grinned, and I had to force myself not to slam his face into the table and force his pants down to his ankles.

How many more weeks had that asshole said?

I was fucking *dying*. Ugh.

Everyone had busied themselves with making breakfast or their phones while we had basically been face-fucking each other in the middle of the kitchen.

Once we separated, Vox glanced at Ryan, raising an eyebrow in question. Ryan gave him a nod, and I narrowed my eyes, glancing back and forth between them.

Ryan almost seemed to understand Vox as easily as I did now, and it made me wonder how they had gotten so close. I obviously trusted Vox, and he was straight as fuck, but still. I was feeling so possessive over Ryan lately that I still felt a small twinge of jealousy at how easily a friendship seemed to have bloomed between them.

I blamed the lack of sex. Maybe I wouldn't feel as desperate to keep him to myself once I had the chance to sink my cock into his hot, tight, virgin ass...

Nah.

Who was I kidding? That would probably just make it worse.

“What's going on?” I asked, and Ryan shot me a mischievous grin.

“Well, while you've been resting, Vox has been in contact with the men you were hunting before Damian took you to be... *recalibrated*.”

My mood immediately darkened.

“You mean the dick heads that *shot me*?” I snapped, and Vox smirked, nodding. He spun his laptop around to show me an encrypted message thread he had opened.

I frowned, pulling the computer closer so I could read the messages. Considering they were communicating with Vox, the conversation seemed to mostly be them talking to each other, and Vox replying with emojis.

RONAN:

Return Buffalo's head, or else! *three water gun emojis*

VOX:

raised eyebrow emoji

RONAN:

YOU THINK I'M JOKING!?

LOGAN:

Relax, baby, we're talking to the mute. He's not going to be very forthcoming.

VOX:

Checkmark emoji

LOGAN:

Listen, we need the cow head back. We're willing to call a truce if your buddy returns it.

VOX:

Sick emoji *Blood Emoji*

LOGAN:

Yeah, we know he's hurt. We're the ones that shot him.

RONAN:

LOL

VOX:

angry emoji

DAKOTA:

facepalm emoji

LOGAN:

Once he's better, let us know if he's willing to meet up to return the cow's head. No weapons. We just want the cow head back and to talk.

VOX:

Thumbs up emoji

"I thought you said no more murder?" I asked, whipping around to look at Ryan.

He frowned. "How did you get *murder* from that text exchange? They want to talk and get their cow head back."

I scoffed. "They *shot* me. Of course I'm going to murder them."

Though even as I said it, the words didn't ring true. They shot me because they thought I was the type of dude *I* hunted. I really couldn't

blame them.

It was just kind of a reflex to be pissed at the reason I hadn't been able to rail my man the way I wanted to.

Vox rolled his eyes and reached across the table to smack me up the side of the head. I gaped at him.

"What!? Don't tell me you're taking their side!"

He glared at me and pulled up what looked like ownership papers to a little boy. He pointed at the product code.

2739.

It was Apex's code.

"Vox thinks that these guys are trying to systemically attack people who fuck with kids," Ryan explained. "They shot you because you worked for Damian, who apparently is a big player in the human trafficking game. He's been trying to keep you in the dark about it since he knows how you feel about anything that involves children," Ryan explained darkly.

Vox pursed his lips and nodded, confirming everything Ryan had just said.

Shame and rage welled through my chest. I *knew* Damian had been fucking lying to me. I just hadn't wanted to face the truth because that would make me *exactly* what my mother had always accused me of being.

A fucking *devil*.

Ryan reached out and squeezed my shoulder, giving me a look that said he knew my thoughts had gone to a dark place.

How did he always do that?

It felt like he could read my mind or just... sense my mood.

"We don't have a lot of friends right now," Ryan said softly, meeting my gaze head-on. "It might be a good idea to meet with these guys and see if they're willing to form an alliance. You need people you and Vox can count on in a gunfight if it comes to that."

"Fine," I snapped, annoyed that I would need to make nice with these assholes but unable to deny Ryan anything he asked of me.

Ryan grinned and nodded, brushing my hair out of my eyes. The small, intimate touch made my whole body tingle all the way down to my toes.

"Don't act like you're doing me some big favor," he teased, his brandy eyes twinkling. "You're the one who's been complaining that you're so *bored*. At least this is something you can do that's not murder or sex."

OceanofPDF.com



Ryan Fairview

Returning the cow's head was... *an experience*. Logan, Ronan, and Dakota were quite the characters, and they were all *gorgeous*.

Cal made me wear a mask at first, but the second we got out of the car, Ronan *screamed* my full name, basically proving they already knew who I was.

It had been an odd experience. Watching a bunch of serial killers... *network*. I suppose.

Ronan had only cared about getting the cow head back, but Logan, on the other hand, was more interested in Cal and his motivations.

Once Logan found out that Damian had abducted Cal as a child and essentially groomed him to kill people, Logan's demeanor had softened considerably.

Dakota's dad apparently also worked for Apex, and they had been spending time digging into the organization and uncovering all the evil shit they were involved in.

After sharing some of their files with Cal, we agreed to form an alliance. They told us to call them if we ever decide to make a move against the mercenary organization. They seemed more than willing to help.

On the car ride back, Cal was quiet and uncharacteristically grim.

“Why don’t we put some music on?” I asked, and he glanced at me, pursing his lips before turning on the radio.

I frowned.

“What about your robot music? You haven’t listened to that in a while...”

Cal’s eyes darkened, and his fingers tightened on the steering wheel. I watched his knuckles turn white as he swallowed.

“I’m not in the mood.”

I narrowed my eyes on him.

“You haven’t been in the *mood* since you were tortured, Callum. Are you going to tell me what’s up with that?” I asked, doing my best to be gentle, but I was unable to keep the concern out of my voice.

His gaze snapped briefly to mine before returning to the road.

“Why do you care, Ryan? You hate my music. Everyone does.”

The bitterness in his tone was worrisome. He’d never seemed upset about people teasing him for being a basehead before. Now, it felt like maybe it did bother him that nobody ever liked it when he listened to something that was clearly a core interest of his. My heart squeezed in my chest, and I reached out, laying my hand on top of his on the steering wheel.

He tensed for a moment, but I laced my fingers through his and tugged his hand in my lap, leaving him to steer with his left hand.

“If you like it, then I like it, Cal,” I said softly, and he raised his eyebrows in surprise.

“What? No, you don’t. You said it sounds like ‘*robots fucking.*’”

I chuckled and nodded. “Well, it *does* sound like that. Maybe it’s not the kind of music I would choose for myself, but I like listening to it with you. I like when you tell me about all the different DJs and who you’ve been to see live. I like the look you get on your face when a big... What do you call it? A big *drop* is coming up, and you get all bouncy.”

I was smiling now, thinking of how he used to jump around and bob to the music as he drove.

I missed it.

He had a small smile on his face now, too, and his eyes kept darting from me to the road.

“Yeah?” he asked, and I nodded.

“Yeah, angel. If you want to listen to some of your music, put it on. I don’t mind.”

His smile disappeared, and he squeezed my hand before pulling away.

“I can’t,” he said, his voice getting tight and rough. He swallowed so hard it sounded like it hurt.

“What do you mean you can’t?”

He paused as if contemplating whether or not he wanted to tell me what he was thinking, but after a minute, he caved.

“When I was chained in the tub, Damian played dubstep every time he came in to hurt me.”

His words rolled over me, and my blood went ice cold.

“He *what*?” I gasped.

Cal nodded, looking sad and vulnerable.

“Yeah.” The word came out gravelly, like it was a struggle for him to speak. “I’ve tried a few times since to put it on, but it always triggers a flashback. I can’t listen to it anymore.”

“Angel... baby...” My heart was fucking breaking in my chest. I wanted to tell him to pull over, so I could crawl into his lap and wrap my arms around him... but he was still healing, and I didn’t want to accidentally hurt him.

He glanced at me, and his lips curved again in a small smile. Reaching out to touch my face, he brushed his thumb tenderly across my jaw before returning his attention to the road.

“It’s okay, Ryan. I don’t need dubstep. I have something even better.”

“And what’s that?” I asked, still reeling from the fact that my angel had been so badly traumatized, and there was nothing I could do to fix it.

We pulled into Fairview, and he gave me one last look before getting out of the car.

“You, baby,” he purred, leaning in and brushing a soft kiss against my lips.

“As long as I have you, I don’t need anything else.”

72



Cal Walker

Alexa, play: Stay - Rihanna, Mikky Ekko

The next few weeks passed without much happening, and *still*, Ryan wouldn't do anything intimate with me.

The only time he touched me was when I woke up screaming from one of my night terrors. Whenever this happened, he would fold me into his chest and rock me gently back and forth, kissing me softly on the top of my head and promising me that everything was going to be okay.

Thankfully, I hadn't tried to kill him again. He seemed to have found a way to rouse me that didn't trigger a violent need to protect myself, but... I still hated that I woke him up nearly every night. Even before my most recent bout of torture, I had suffered from night terrors. That was why I slept primarily at Apex instead of the townhouse. The thought of worrying Naomi or waking her up because of my inability to keep my shit together made me feel like a failure.

Back then, my nightmares were usually of my mother strangling me. Now they were of Damian.

“*Who could ever love you, devil boy!?*” My mother’s words would come out of Damian’s mouth as he forced the burning hot brand into my chest.

“*No one loves you. How could they?*” Damian’s voice sizzled along with my flesh, and I screamed and screamed and screamed.

I kept trying to tell him that I could sleep in my car since the rest of the house was occupied. Every time I said that, he always looked like he wanted to punch me in the face for suggesting such a thing, which made me feel good.

However, despite how much he made me feel like my feelings were reciprocated in the dead of night, whenever I tried to initiate any physical form of intimacy, he adamantly refused and pulled away.

It hurt and made me feel like he didn’t actually want me after all. He used my health as an excuse, but that’s exactly what it felt like. An *excuse*.

I didn’t need him to *love* me. I’d accepted the fact that no one would ever *really* love me. It sucked, but it was something I’d come to terms with.

However, at the very least, I needed to be able to *pretend* that Ryan did, and it was impossible to do that when he wouldn’t let me do anything more than kiss him.

I was reduced to following him around the house as he did his uptight Ryan things. He filled his days doing the most boring shit. Like meticulously cleaning every single fucking nook and cranny or going through a metric shit ton of paperwork.

There was one day when I sat with him for hours after he decided he needed to reorganize seven years’ worth of tax files that he had kept in case of an audit.

I couldn’t understand why the fuck anyone would *voluntarily* do this shit on their time off. Sure, he was taking a forced vacation, but still. This was time we could have spent screwing each other’s brains out if he wasn’t so goddamn strict. Instead, he seemed to want to spend it going through dusty old files and boxes.

Both of us seemed to grow increasingly anxious as the days went on. Me, because I was bored, and I was jerking it in the shower like four times a day to keep myself from non-conning Ryan. And he... Well, I didn’t really know why he was so anxious.

I was nearing the six-week mark of my healing journey, for which I'd been counting down the days. Considering six weeks was the date Dr. Callahan said I would be free and clear to fuck again (my words, not his).

Wondering if I could convince Ryan to give it up a few days early, I went looking for him. After searching the house top to bottom with no sign of him, I needed to resort to checking the video feeds of the house to find his ginger ass. He still didn't know about the cameras. I planned on telling him *eventually*. There just never seemed to be a good time. I knew he was going to be pissed, so I was shamelessly avoiding it.

After rewinding the tapes and watching for a few minutes, I found him disappearing into the attic.

I hadn't needed to use the shitty crutch for over a week and was feeling fully back to my old self when I popped my head up into the dusty space.

I groaned when I realized he was on yet *another* one of his clean-freak binges, and he glanced up from what he was doing, a small frown on his face.

A beam of sunlight pooled in from the tiny attic window, and it caught in his soft, red hair, outlining his perfectly sculpted body from behind.

My mouth went dry at the sight of him. He looked like some sort of heavenly being, and for a moment, I couldn't speak or move.

He was *breathtaking*, and he was *mine*. I refused to wait another second to have him.

"Hey, what are you doing up here?" he asked, looking up from a picture frame he had clutched in his hands. He was sitting cross-legged in front of an open box labeled 'Misc 2006' and seemed to have gotten caught up looking at old photos.

"I came to find you," I replied, my voice coming out gruffer than I intended. Dropping to my knees before him, I reached out and slid my hands into his hair, grabbing a fistful of soft auburn strands. I pulled him toward me and pressed my lips against his. He let out the most beautiful little groan, and I opened my mouth, greedily swallowing the sound.

"Baby, I need you," I murmured against his lips. "Please. I can't wait any longer. Let me in." I kissed him over and over again, nipping at his plush bottom lip and sucking it into my mouth. He groaned again and slid his hand up my chest and into my hair, slipping his hot tongue into my mouth and kissing me back.

I didn't want to force him. I wanted him to want me, and when he kissed me like this, it almost felt like someone loved me, and I needed that more desperately than I ever had before.

A rush of warmth flooded my body as my mouth filled with the taste of him, and I was suddenly fisting his T-shirt in the hand that wasn't tangled in his hair, pushing him backward toward the floor.

All the blood in my body rushed from my head to my cock, and before I knew it, I was dizzy with desire. I was basically crawling on top of him when he pressed a firm hand into my chest. Before I could get him beneath me where he belonged, he broke our kiss.

"We should stop," he breathed, gently pulling away, and I growled into his mouth, shaking my head.

"I don't want to stop," I hissed, forcing him down more firmly.

He didn't understand. I *needed* him. I needed to be touched. It had been too long. The more time that passed without him touching me, the more my insecurities were rising up and taking over.

I was beginning to feel more like his roommate than his boyfriend, and I *hated* it. He'd asked me that day after we had been together in the field what we were, and I regretted now not putting a label on it.

"Cal. I said *no*." His tone changed to that firm voice he used that told me there was no arguing with him.

The urge to *make* him be with me rolled through my chest, but I forced myself to let him go. This wasn't what I wanted. It wasn't just about the sex; it was about feeling wanted, and right now, I felt anything *but* wanted.

Maybe he wasn't attracted to me anymore.

After taking care of me while I had been injured, he had cleaned up my puke, helped me shower like some sort of child, and there had been times in the early days when he had spoon-fed me when I had been half asleep, knocked out on painkillers.

He probably looked at me like some sort of burden now.

For the first time in my life, I felt ugly and unattractive.

Pushing away these painful thoughts, I snarled and shot to my feet. "It's been almost *six weeks*, Ryan, and you won't let me touch you. You're my *boyfriend*."

His eyebrows raised, and his cheeks turned pink. "I-I am? I thought you didn't care about putting a label on it."

“Obviously, I fucking care, and yes, you are. You’re my boyfriend, Ryan. I need to be able to fuck my boyfriend.”

“Baby, you know what Dr. Callahan said.”

“*Fuck Dr. Callahan! I’m fine! And I need you.*”

“I don’t want to risk you overexerting yourself too soon.”

I snorted. “That sounds like a fucking excuse.”

He frowned. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“It means it sounds like an *excuse*. What is the real reason you won’t let me get close to you?” The words left my mouth before I could stop them. Did I really want to know the answer to that?

Because you’re the fucking devil. You’re an unlovable, evil piece of shit, and I never wanted you in the first place. You forced your way into my life, and now you expect me to actually want you?

Ryan’s mouth was moving, and I couldn’t hear him over the imagined words that were spinning through my mind.

The backs of my eyes pricked with tears, and I took a step back.

“You know what? Forget it. You clearly don’t want me. I’ll get out of your hair,” I snapped, turning away.

My eyes were filled with hot tears, and I could barely see where I was going as I stumbled away from him. I hadn’t cried since I was a little kid. Damian had made sure of that.

Mercenaries don’t cry.

Feeling weak and ashamed, I made sure Ryan couldn’t see as I rushed to leave the attic.

Before I could even make it to the ladder, strong fingers curled around my bicep, and Ryan spun me to face him.

“Let me fucking go!” I snarled, frustrated that a tear slid down my cheek, just as Ryan turned me to face him. His brandy eyes tracked the tear, and his eyebrows shot up into his hairline.

He looked... shocked.

“Cal, where is this coming from?” he asked gently, and I ripped my arm out of his grip.

“What do you mean where is this coming from? I’ve been trying to be with you for weeks, but you keep turning me down. I don’t want to fucking force you, Ryan. If you don’t want me, just say so. Stop wasting my fucking time.”

I tried to pull away again, but Ryan grabbed my shoulders and held me in place; a flicker of anger crossed his face.

“You think this is a waste of time?”

“It is if you don’t even want to be with me.”

“You think I don’t want to *be with you*?”

“Obviously! Why else won’t you touch me? And don’t say it’s because I’m injured. I haven’t even needed that stupid crutch for a week!”

Without warning, he shook me and began shouting.

“I ALMOST LOST YOU!”

I jerked as his fingers dug into my shoulders so hard I knew I would bruise.

His outburst shocked me enough that I stood frozen for a moment, gaping at him as he tried to get himself under control.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath in through his nose and out through his mouth before locking eyes with me again.

“I almost lost you, Cal. I thought you were going to *die* on my table.” He brushed his fingers over my chest, directly over where he knew my brand was. It was almost completely healed by now, but his gentle touch, even over my T-shirt, made me flinch.

Not because it hurt but because of what it symbolized.

“Did I ever tell you how my dad died?” he asked softly, and I frowned but shook my head. I realized suddenly, outside of what I had read about him online, I didn’t actually know the details of Ryan’s past.

We usually talked about me and all the bullshit I had suffered through. As the realization washed over me, I immediately felt like a selfish asshole.

It had been easy to take his quiet support and interest in my life for granted, especially when I was feeling raw and going through so much.

But looking at him now, he had real fear in his eyes, and I quickly understood that it had something to do with his own trauma he had suffered through.

“No. Tell me,” I whispered as he reached up and brushed the tear that had slid down my cheek away with his thumb. Taking my hand, he led me over to where he had been sitting by the box. He scooped up the picture frame he’d been looking at when I came in.

He passed it to me, and I held it up to the light and looked down into the frame.

A tiny version of Ryan with a missing front tooth and a giant bouquet of lilies beamed up at me. He'd been much more freckly as a child, and his ginger hair was much more orange. There was a handsome, dark-haired man beside him, with his arm draped over baby Ryan's shoulder. They were surrounded by several vases full of flowers, primarily lilies, and both seemed so freaking happy I felt like my heart might burst.

"Is that him?" I asked, brushing my thumb over the handsome man's face. Ryan came up beside me and slid his hand around my waist, smiling down at the picture with me.

"Yeah. He was the fucking best," he muttered gruffly. Glancing up at me, he swallowed.

"You remind me of him a lot," he said, and I frowned.

"Telling me I remind you of your dad isn't helping convince me that you're still attracted to me," I grumbled.

Ryan frowned. "You think I'm not attracted to you?"

I shrugged, looking away. "Maybe. I don't know. I feel weak. Like I can't be the man you need me to be. I don't like that you've had to take care of me these last few weeks, and the fact that you don't want to touch me at all isn't helping."

"Callum, you're the most attractive person I've ever met," Ryan whispered, tilting my face down so he could look me in the eyes.

"I'm attracted to everything about you. It's been just as hard for me as it has been for you these last few weeks. Every time you kiss me, it takes everything in me not to just let you tear all my clothes off and have your way with me."

I swallowed, searching his face for any indication that he was just saying these things to placate me, but I didn't think you could fake the intense heat that was smoldering in his brandy eyes.

"I know I'm not very experienced in these things, but I think about it all the time, you know. What it would feel like for you to..."

My cock twitched in my pants, and I tugged him closer to me, skating my lips over his and inhaling his sweet scent.

"For me to what?" I rumbled, and he quivered against me.

His adorable ginger flush spread through his cheeks, and I dropped gentle kisses on each side of his face, enjoying how warm his blush felt against my lips.

"For you to fuck me." He whispered, and I audibly groaned out loud.

“Fuck, Ryan.” I nipped his lower lip. “Keep saying things like that.”

He laughed nervously and pulled away again, making my heart sink in disappointment.

“My dad was diagnosed with a heart condition when I was twenty.”

I felt like someone dumped a cold bucket of water on me. How had we gone to talking about me fucking him to *this*?

He looked down at the picture of him and his dad surrounded by flowers, and he looked so broken-hearted that I felt like a complete asshole for trying to make this moment about me.

“His doctor told him he needed to avoid any strenuous labor, too. We all took it really seriously for the first few weeks, but... over time, we just kind of fell back into the normal swing of things.”

His eyes turned glassy, and he glanced up at me, swallowing so hard that I heard it.

“He died of a heart attack because I let him help me with a casket transportation one day for a service. Our pallbearer had a family emergency and couldn’t make it, so it was just me and my dad that day. I *knew* he shouldn’t have been helping, but it was just to lift the casket into the hearse, and he’s been feeling *great*. He kept telling me he was fine...”

A tear spilled down his cheek, and I felt like my heart was cracking in my chest.

“Baby...” I murmured, cupping his face and wiping a tear away. “That’s not your fault.”

“Isn’t it?” Ryan asked, meeting my gaze head-on, and I could see how much he blamed himself for his father’s death. How long had he been holding onto this guilt?

“I was there when the doctor gave the orders. I should have fought him harder on it. There was that seed of doubt in the back of my head, telling me to stop him or refuse his help, but I didn’t, and now... now he’s *gone*.”

“Ryan...” I didn’t know what to say. Everything that came to mind felt insensitive.

“I can’t let that happen to you, Cal. If something happens because you push yourself too soon, I’ll never forgive myself.”

“Hey... stop it,” I growled softly, wrapping my hand around his nape. “What happened with your dad is *not* your fault. He was a grown man, and he was going to do what he wanted to do, whether you told him to or not.”

My ginger snap sniffed softly as I pressed my forehead against his.

“Listen to me. You said I remind you of him? If he was anything like me, then there was no stopping him from doing whatever the hell he wanted to do. He’s probably cursing you in his grave for blaming yourself for what happened. I know I would be.”

Ryan let out a choked laugh, and my heart soared at the fact that I had been able to make him smile.

Wrapping my arms around him, I pulled him into my chest. Still clutching the picture, he wrapped his arms around my waist and rested his head on my shoulder.

“Besides. That’s not going to happen to me. There’s a difference between a bullet wound and a chronic heart condition, Ryan. Dr. Callahan said six weeks. A couple days off isn’t going to make a difference. I know my body. As good as I’m sure fucking you will be, it’s not going to put me into cardiac arrest.”

Ryan burst out laughing, pulling back to look at me with tear-stained cheeks.

“That was an incredibly insensitive thing to say, Callum,” he chided me, though his tone said differently.

I shrugged, grinning down at him. “Tact has never been my strong suit.”

“You can say that again,” he grumbled, and I laughed, pulling the picture out of his hand so I could look at it again.

“In a plot twist that shocked no one, you were a cute fucking kid.” I beamed down at the little toothless version of Ryan. “Were lilies your dad’s favorite flower too? Is that why there’s so many of them in this photo?”

Ryan brushed his thumb fondly over the frame and sighed.

“This was taken after a pretty rough day at school.”

“Oh yeah? What happened?” I asked, already knowing from how sad he sounded that this story was going to piss me off.

He glanced up at me, biting his lower lip anxiously as if he were nervous to tell me.

“What?” I prodded. “Don’t look at me like that. Now I *need* to know.”

“If I tell you this story, you have to promise not to try to hunt anyone down and kill them.”

My mood immediately darkened.

“I can’t promise that.”

“Then I’m not telling you.”

I growled. “You might as well fucking tell me, or I won’t rest until I dig up whoever it was that hurt you in this story on my own. Trust me. You won’t like it if I have to find them myself.”

“*Callum!*” he whined. “The whole point of you quitting Apex was so you don’t have to kill people anymore. Promise me you won’t hunt down and murder the kids that gave me a hard time at school. It was years ago. I’ve moved past it.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Fine. I won’t hunt down and kill the kids that gave you a hard time. I promise.”

Just because I couldn’t kill them didn’t mean I couldn’t hurt them real bad. Right?

I adjusted my halo as Ryan nodded, accepting my promise at face value. He sat down on the dusty floor, leaning back against his hands.

“Sit down. It’s a bit of a long story.”

I flopped down on the floor with him, suddenly eager to learn more about the man I had fallen head over heels for.

“So, when I was eight years old, we had to bring in something for show and tell...”

73



Ryan Fairview

8 years old

Mrs. Rodriguez had told us all to bring in something that showed the class what we wanted to do when we grew up.

Everyone immediately turned in their seats to stare at me. They all knew I lived in a funeral home, and I braced myself for all the mean things I knew they were going to say to me about the project.

“Mrs. Rodriguez! Ryan shouldn’t be allowed to come to show and tell this week. He’ll probably bring in a dead body!” Kenny Samuels exclaimed loudly. His posse of mean friends sniggered as I sunk lower in my seat, hating the way everyone’s eyes were burning into me.

“Ewww!” Clarissa Daniels squealed. “I don’t want to see a dead body! Mrs. Rodriguez! Tell Ryan he can’t bring in a body!”

My face was burning, and it was taking everything in me not to call Clarissa a big dumb, stupid head. Only an idiot would think you could bring

a dead body in for show and tell. There were all kinds of rules around taking care of the deceased, and you *certainly* couldn't take someone's loved one to *school*.

I didn't even *want* to be a mortician when I grew up. I wanted to be a florist. But everyone always assumed I would take on the family business the second they met me. It was a curse that had followed me around since kindergarten, when my dad had come to school for career day and told everyone that we lived in a funeral home.

Ever since then, my sister, Theo, and I had a pretty tough time with the other kids. Theo handled it better than I did. When we were at recess, sometimes she even beat up the bullies that picked on me, even though it got her in a lot of trouble with Father Samwell, our school principal.

I would show them. I would come to show and tell with some of the most amazing flower arrangements they've ever seen and tell them all about my plans to become a florist.

Then they would all feel stupid and forget all about the dead body jokes.

Everyone was always so impressed with my arrangements when I helped make them for funeral services. One lady even told me once the vase I put together was so amazing she thought a grown-up had done it.

Despite the jeers from the class and Mrs. Rodriguez's pitiful attempt to get everyone to calm down, I felt myself smile at the memory.

Yeah. I was going to blow everyone away and have the best show-and-tell presentation anyone had ever seen.

It was going to be *perfect*.

I would make sure of it.



IT TOOK ALL WEEK AND ONLY A *LITTLE* HELP FROM MY MOM, BUT BY THE time show and tell day came around, I was ready.

Getting my project to school was the hardest part. I didn't want to risk taking it with me on the bus, so I carried the four-foot by two-foot plywood board for the entire twenty-minute walk to school all by myself.

It was heavy and it was hot out, but it was so *worth it*.

My project turned out *amazing*.

Mom helped me find the plywood at a home hardware store, but I had collected all the flowers from her garden and arranged them by myself.

The board was now covered with peach, white, and pink flowers, and the words '*Flowers by Ryan*' were made out of perfectly manicured green moss.

It took forever to get the moss to line up perfectly with the stencils my mom bought me from the craft store, but the final result was amazing.

Dad said it looked like a real professional made the sign, and I had never been more proud of anything in my life.

My mom took a picture of me with my sign before I left for school that morning, telling me that it was so she could show 'my dark angel when he arrived.'

She was always going on about this dark angel that was supposed to show up, and it always made me feel safe.

Like someone was looking out for me, even when it felt like I was all alone. I liked the idea that I had a guardian angel of some kind, and I couldn't wait to see what he thought of my flower sign when he finally did come to meet me for real.

After some pictures and some whispered words of encouragement from my mom, I started my journey to school.

I made sure to get to class early so I could keep my flower sign covered up with the tarp my father had lent me. I didn't want anyone to see it before the grand reveal.

I waited anxiously for my turn as Mrs. Rodrigues seemed to call every other student in the class before me.

The longer I waited, the more excited I got. I *definitely* had the most impressive project. Most kids had brought in an action figure or a stuffed animal to illustrate their dreams for their futures. Kenny Samuels brought in his dad's old football helmet, telling everyone he was going to be an NFL star one day, and it took everything in me not to roll my eyes.

Finally, it was my turn. As soon as Mrs. Rodrigues called my name, the class started whispering and snickering to each other. Despite the burn in my cheeks, I forced myself to ignore them and lugged up my flower sign, making sure it stayed covered until I was at the front of the class.

Once I had it propped up and ready, I whipped away the tarp and beamed at my work. It looked just as perfect as it had that morning in the

kitchen, and I reveled in the silence that fell over the class as they took in the flower sign.

Turning to face them with a big smile, I opened my mouth to tell them all about my plans to become a florist when Kenny suddenly burst out laughing.

I frowned.

Several of my classmates actually looked shocked and impressed with my flower sign, but Kenny's reaction seemed to have stolen the attention of the class.

Everyone looked away from my work to that big dumb bully as he wiped tears from his eyes.

"What's so funny!?" I snapped, and Kenny snorted.

"Nothing, Fairview. I just didn't know you were both an undertaker and a *faggot*."

The class gasped, and my frown deepened.

Faggot?

I wasn't familiar with that word, but the sick, twisting feeling in my gut told me it wasn't a nice thing to say about someone.

"Mr. Samuels! That kind of language is not tolerated in this class!" Mrs. Rodrigues sounded absolutely appalled.

All the other kids were joining Kenny now, jeering and calling me that word that made my tummy churn. One kid even threw an eraser at me, and I barely had time to duck out of the way.

It hit my flower sign, and panic tore through me. Not wanting the increasingly rowdy class to ruin all my hard work, I scrambled to pick up my sign and get it back to my desk.

However, as I rushed through the aisles, Clarissa stuck out her foot and tripped me. I went down *hard*.

Horror rolled through me as I fell in what felt like slow motion. My body crushed the sign beneath me, and I *felt it* as the heavy board crushed all my flowers into smithereens.

There was a roaring in my ears, and I shakily got to my feet, pulling the board back to assess the damage.

The sign was completely ruined.

Hours of hard work and meticulous arranging were gone in seconds. Laughter and more jeers bubbled up around me, and tears burned behind my eyes as Mrs. Rodriguez tried to get the class back under control.

Undertaker!

Faggot!

Freak!

I sniffed as I lost the battle against my tears, and I wiped my nose with the back of my wrist just as the bell rang.

Not waiting for Mrs. Rodriguez to dismiss us, I leapt to my feet, leaving my destroyed sign on the ground before sprinting away.

The laughter seemed to follow me as I rushed down the hall toward the bathroom, fully crying now.

I had thought for sure that if I worked hard enough, they would finally see the real me, and I would be able to escape the horrible labels they had slapped on me since I first came to this stupid school.

Why did it feel like everyone hated me so much? How was I supposed to keep coming back to this place every day with literally *no one* in my corner? My mom always told me that my dark angel was coming to save me, but he never did.

No one ever came to save me from the bullies.

There was no guardian angel.

Only mean children with hurtful words, crushed flowers, and broken dreams.

74



Ryan Fairview

8 years old

The hallways started to fill with students switching classes as I ran, half-blinded by tears, toward the bathroom.

Keeping my head down to avoid further humiliation, I rushed through the crowds, not bothering to look where I was going.

I slammed smack dab into someone, and I yelped in panic as a pair of hands firmly gripped my shoulders, keeping me steady on my feet.

My heart leapt in excitement.

Was this my dark angel?

Maybe he had come to help me after all.

I looked up, hoping to find the heavenly being that my mother kept promising would come to be standing before me, ready to kick some serious bully butt. My heart sank when I realized it was just Theo.

She frowned down at me, her dark gaze immediately cataloging my reddened eyes and wet cheeks.

“Hey. What’s wrong? Wasn’t your big presentation today? Why are you crying?” she asked, and I sniffed, throwing my arms around her waist and burying my face in her white button-up uniform shirt we were all required to wear.

There was a girl version with a skirt and a more tailored top, but Theo always wore the boy uniform instead, even though it got her in trouble with Father Samwell.

I couldn’t even form words to tell her that my flowers were crushed and that the other kids had laughed me out of the class.

I just shook, completely devastated in her arms, when I heard a familiar mean voice shout down the hall behind me.

“There he is! HA! Look at that! The faggot undertaker and his dyke sister! Look at those freaks!” Kenny jeered, and I froze, suddenly unable to even breathe.

He had followed me out here. Ruining my project hadn’t been enough; these kids still wanted to torture me more.

Before I knew what was happening, Theo was shoving me behind her, her face contorted with rage.

Theo was three years older than me, and from the look on her face, she knew what those words meant, and she was not happy about it.

“The fuck did you just say!?” she snarled. Kenny sneered at her, giving her the finger.

“You heard me, dyke. Why don’t you and your faggot brother drop out? No one wants you here.”

Everyone in the hallway fell silent and seemed to stare at Theo, waiting to see what she would do. She had a bit of a reputation as a scrapper, and people typically didn’t try to mess with her. Not nearly as much as they messed with me, and it quickly became apparent why.

Even though Theo was a girl and Kenny was a boy, Theo was still older than Kenny, and she had recently taken up boxing. So, when she shot forward and chucked him against the lockers, he didn’t stand a chance.

The entire hall watched in horrified silence as Theo unleashed on Kenny. She slammed her fist into his face once, twice, *three times*, before he even realized what was happening.

There was a sickening *crunch*, and everyone gasped as blood shot out of Ken's nose like a messed up firehose.

It was over as quickly as it started. After the third punch, Theo dropped Kenny like his touch disgusted her. She curled her lip at him as he groaned and cried on the ground, holding his bloody face in his hands like he could fix his nose just by touching it.

"Say that shit to me or my brother again, bitch, and I'll break more than just your nose," she spat.

The hallway was completely silent, with the exception of Kenny's pained moans and whimpers.

No one seemed to know what to do or say when suddenly, I heard Clarissa's high-pitched whine.

"Down here, Father Samwell! She's out of control!" The crowd turned collectively to witness the school principal appear, as he was led by the hand by Clarissa Davis.

I didn't like Father Samuels. I knew he was a respected member of the church, and that meant he was supposed to be someone we could trust, but there was a meanness about him that had always made me want to stay out of his way.

"What is going on here?" he asked, his gaze falling on Theo and her bloody knuckles. He didn't say it like he was upset with Theo. It was almost like he was happy to have a reason to punish her.

Father Samwell loved giving out detentions, but he seemed to have a special interest in my sister specifically.

Theo just glared at Samwell. She gritted her teeth and clenched her fists at her sides. After a beat, when it became clear she wasn't going to say anything to protect herself, I stepped in front of her.

"Kenny called us bad words, and he was bullying us! Theo was just standing up for me," I said, doing my best to keep my voice from shaking.

Father Samwell cocked his head to the side, and an evil grin spread across his face.

"Is that so? Well, I hardly think calling someone a few names deserved such a violent rebuttal." His gaze skated over Theo's body, and her eyes narrowed. Her face turned white with hatred.

"It seems as if we also have another uniform violation that needs addressing," he crooned.

“Sir! What about Kenny? Look at him; he needs help!” Clarissa squealed.

Father Samwell glanced at Clarissa and nodded. “That he does, child. Why don’t you take Mr. Samuels to the nurse’s office?” He turned back to face my sister. “Theodora. You’re to come with me. We’ll need to have a *chat* about what sort of behavior is becoming of a lady.”

Theo shook with either rage or fear. Maybe both.

“No,” she hissed, and Father Samwell chuckled.

“Hmm. Well, maybe your brother could benefit from a lesson. Shall I put him in detention in your place?”

Theo’s eyes widened, and she shook her head, shoving me behind her as she stepped forward.

“No. No. I’ll come,” she said, and I frowned, not having a good feeling about this.

“Theo, I don’t think -”

“It’s fine, Ry. I’ll see you at home,” she said, following our principal as he led her in the direction of his office.

Clarissa helped Kenny to his feet and took him away as well.

I was left standing there, feeling lost and confused about everything that had just gone down.



Ryan Fairview

8 years old

By the time I got home, I was still feeling awful. Theo didn't meet me after school to walk back together, which made me worry, and on top of that, whispers of the altercation in the hallway followed me around through the rest of my classes.

As I entered Fairview, I could hear my mother bustling about in the kitchen, but I wasn't in the mood to hear all about the 'dark angel.' I was starting to feel like he was a load of bullcrap, so I wandered toward the stairs to my room instead.

As I passed the viewing room, I nearly jumped out of my skin as my dad's voice interrupted my wallowing.

"Hey, kiddo, why the long face?"

I glanced over into the room to find my dad tidying up after what must have been a service.

“Uhm... nothing.”

My dad frowned and stopped what he was doing, turning to give me his full attention. My dad and I looked nothing alike. I took after our mother, with my red hair and freckles. George Fairview was tall, dark, and handsome. He styled his hair into a respectable side part that made him look really suave and put together in his black and white suit.

He also had worn a mustache for as long as I could remember. Once, he shaved it off, and he looked so weird without it that both Theo and I begged him to never shave it off again.

The mustache in question turned down at my clearly sour mood.

“Presentation didn’t go well?”

I shook my head and ground the toe of my shoe into the paisley floor runner that ran through the entrance hall.

“Wanna talk about it?” my dad asked, his voice soft and gentle.

I glanced up at him, the harsh sting of tears burning behind my eyes again, and the next thing I knew, I was spilling my guts.

I told him all about how Clarissa made me ruin my sign, how Kenny called me that horrible word, and that Theo had stood up for me in the hallway but then got in trouble again with Father Samwell.

My dad was a pretty easygoing man most of the time, but as soon as the words ‘*faggot*,’ and ‘*dyke*’ left my lips, a scary, angry look that I wasn’t used to seeing crossed his face.

“I see,” he said, brushing one of my tears away with his thumb.

“What do those words mean?” I asked him, sniffing loudly.

He pursed his lips and thought for a moment.

“Those are negative words used by people with a very narrow view of the world to describe people they perceive to be different from themselves.”

I frowned at him. “I don’t know what that means.”

“It means, Ryan, that I’m going to have to have a chat with Father Samwell and this Kenny kid’s parents.”

I hiccupped and nodded. He smiled at me and grabbed my hand.

“Now. If those kids think you’re such a freak for liking flowers, then I guess I’m a freak, too.” He grinned down at me, tugging me toward the back of the house. “What do you say us freaks stick together and make some crazy bouquets for tomorrow’s service, hmm? All of your mom’s lilies are in bloom, and I bet you can help me put something together that

would blow Mrs. William's wig off... if she was still alive, that is." He winked at me, and I bit back a giggle, following him out the back door.

We spent the rest of the day laughing together in the garden. I lost myself in the methodical and meticulous process of harvesting the lilies and making so many arrangements that soon, we were surrounded in bushels and bushels of fragrant flowers.

My dad and I joked around and chatted the whole time. For the first time that day, I didn't care that I didn't have a guardian angel to protect me.

I had my dad, and he made me feel safe and loved and *normal*.

Watching him trim the stem of a particularly robust lily stalk, I realized at that moment that maybe I didn't want to be a florist after all.

Screw what those kids at school thought about me. I wanted to be like my dad, and if being a mortician was good enough for him, then it was good enough for me.

OceanofPDF.com

76



Cal Walker

Alexa, play: Seeds - Yoke Lore

(Present Day)

“We went a little overboard with the lilies, as you can see.” Ryan smiled down at the photo, his eyes glassy with tears. “The whole house was full of them for a week, and everything smelled amazing.”

My heart was pounding in my chest, and I was so full of conflicting emotions that I found myself unable to speak.

Before I met Ryan, I didn’t really *feel* emotions like this. Damian had pretty much pounded the feelings out of me. Every time I started to feel angry, sad, or remorseful about things, I would bury those feelings with stupid jokes, drugs, or just straight-up dissociation.

But now... now it was like a giant wall had come down, and I was drowning in all these feelings I didn't know how to process or unpack.

I was *angry*.

Angry that those kids had treated Ryan that way. The thought of someone telling Ryan he was anything other than *perfect* made me literally see fucking red.

No *wonder* he had a hard time accepting he was attracted to me at first! He was probably carrying around those shitty words his whole fucking life!

I was so goddamn livid; I wanted to totally forget about my promise to Ryan and hunt down that Kenny bitch right the fuck now and cut his fucking dick off.

However, under the rage was this nagging feeling of remorse or guilt on some level. He kept talking about this dark angel that never showed up to save him.

His mother had mentioned it before, too, and Ryan had been calling me *angel* lately.

Was that... supposed to be me?

Confirming what I already suspected, Ryan dug through the box and pulled out an album. He flipped through it until he landed on another photo of him equally toothless but standing on the front porch of Fairview with the flower sign from the story.

He gave me a bashful grin.

"Took over a decade, but this is for you, I guess." He slipped the photo out of the album and handed it to me. My mom took it for you so you could see my flower sign."

I still couldn't speak. My throat had a massive lump in it, and I swallowed, looking down at my tiny ginger snap and his perfect flower sign.

I was his dark angel.

I was supposed to have been there protecting him! And instead, I was... what? Being groomed by Damian *fucking* Ryker to protect pedophiles instead, apparently...

Oooohhhh, the anger was back... and this time, it wasn't directed at bitch-ass Kenny Samuels.

It was directed at someone much more dangerous.

I swallowed, forcing back the painful lump in my throat as I glanced back at Ryan, who was oblivious to the chaotic storm of emotion that was

raging through me.

“Anyway. I know I get really uptight about doing things properly here, but you have to understand... This place was my father’s legacy. It’s all I have left of him. When he died, I vowed to take it over and keep it alive. I want... I want to run this place in a way that would have made him proud.”

Seeing the anxious look cross over his face, a crack in my anger broke open, and I reached out to touch his hand.

“Of course your dad would be proud of you, Ryan. How could he not be? Look at everything you’ve done to keep Fairview alive. You basically run this place all by yourself. You’re amazing, baby.”

He chuckled and put the album back in the box he had been unpacking before I arrived.

“I don’t know about that. We’ve been closed for a while now, and I’m getting a little bit worried. We have savings, but they’ll only last so long. I was hoping to go through some of this junk and see if there was anything worth selling to help cover us for a bit longer.”

I frowned at that, absolutely *appalled* that he was even worried about money at all.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were stressed about money? Baby, it’s my fault we’re on lockdown. I’ll cover all your bills until we can get you back up and running.”

Ryan gave me a sad smile.

“I appreciate that, angel. I do. But all your money is tied up right now. Vox’s too. I had no idea how expensive it was to outbid hit men. He was showing me some of the offers Damian had out there, and I think it would be better to hold onto your cash in case we need it to keep your sisters safe.”

Despite the way all my hair stood up on end at his use of the nickname *angel*, that burning sting of fury ripped through me again.

Fucking. Damian.

Ryan was barely paying attention to me anymore. He was back in ‘Ryan mode,’ with his adorable frown painted on his face as he pulled another box toward himself.

“I’m pretty sure granny Fairview left us a sterling tea set in here somewhere... silver’s always worth something...” he muttered.

I watched in agony as my ginger snap dug through his attic for family heirlooms to pawn off so he could keep his father’s legacy afloat. It was

sending every single instinct I had to take care of him into a frenzy.

This was *my* fault.

He had worked his whole life to keep this business alive, and here he was, putting it all on the line for *me*.

No.

I wouldn't have it.

I stood up and leaned over, dropping a gentle kiss on his forehead.

"I'm going to go rest for a bit, ginger snap," I lied.

He nodded absently, still rifling through old dusty boxes.

"Okay, angel. I'll come wake you up when it's time for dinner."

"Yeah. Sounds good," I muttered, already making my way down the ladder and into the hall on the second floor.

The anger in my chest only seemed to build as I stalked toward our bedroom, where I knew my phone was still untouched, charging.

Ripping the cable out of the base, I unlocked it and didn't hesitate before opening my conversation with Ryan.

Over fifty unread messages awaited me, and I suddenly couldn't keep myself from gobbling them up.

They started off kind of angry, then they turned to worry and concern.

GINGER SNAP:

Cal, please answer me. I'm fucking terrified. Where are you?

GINGER SNAP:

Cal, what the actual fuck? Answer me!

GINGER SNAP:

I tried to call. Your phone just goes to voicemail. When you see this, can you please send me a text? I'm super worried about you.

GINGER SNAP:

Vox is here. Naomi, too. He told me all about recalibration. Baby... I just want to come get you. I wish your fucking friend would tell me where you are!

GINGER SNAP:

I don't know if you're seeing these and just can't respond, but on the off chance that you can, I just want you to know that I'm thinking about you. I think about you every second, Cal. I just want to know that you're alright.

GINGER SNAP:

I hate that I'm so helpless and can't do anything right now. Sitting around like this is killing me! Vox said (well, I guess 'wrote') that it usually lasts a week, and it's been four days. I hope you're okay. You're strong, Cal. And so fucking brave. Just hang in there, baby. Thinking about you always.

GINGER SNAP:

Did I ever tell you that my mom used to tell me I had a dark angel and that he was going to come save me someday?

GINGER SNAP:

I used to kind of resent it because there were so many times in my life when I could have really used a dark angel to come save me... I was kind of a wimpy kid lol.

GINGER SNAP:

Anyway, I stopped believing he was coming after a while, but she never stopped believing you would show up... and now I feel like an idiot for not believing, Cal. Because you're here. You did show up. I'm sorry it took me so long to see it, but I do now. I can't lose you, baby.

GINGER SNAP:

You have to survive this, Cal. You have to come back.

GINGER SNAP:

Please, don't leave me, angel. I just finally found you. Don't leave me alone again. The sun doesn't shine as bright without you.

My throat closed up, and I reached up to touch my cheeks, realizing that they were wet with tears.

Jesus fucking Christ.

I was getting soft.

Or maybe... Ryan was worth crying for.

I was his dark angel. He'd been waiting for me for his whole life, and I'd never showed up...

Despite the fact that it wasn't my fault and it was silly to feel like it was, I couldn't help it.

Would I have found him sooner if I hadn't had a crazy bitch mom who had locked me up in a cage? Would we have maybe met in grade school if I had been given the chance to go to school like a normal kid instead of being trained to kill people by a sadist?

I could have protected him from those bitch-ass kids who hurt him and wrecked his flower sign.

I could have met his dad.

Maybe I could have helped move the casket that day instead of his father, and George would still be alive.

Who knew.

All I knew was none of that happened, or even had the chance of happening, because of Damian *fucking* Ryker... and he was going to pay for it.

Switching to my conversation with Damian, I scanned the unread messages there.

His ranged from threatening to condescending.

DAMIAN:

When you're done with your little temper tantrum, I expect you in my office on your knees, begging for forgiveness, Callum.

DAMIAN:

Fine. You want to play it like that? Take some time to cool off, but I will not wait forever, Mr. Walker. Don't make me come looking for you.

The most recent message had been sent that morning.

DAMIAN:

My patience is not endless, Callum. You have three days to come home before I start killing people... starting with that red-headed faggot you're so obsessed with.

I nearly crushed the phone in my hand.

The world literally turned red for a moment, and my pupils felt like they were vibrating. Gritting my teeth together, I fired a text back.

CAL:

On my way back. Be ready for me.

I didn't wait for his response. I chucked the phone back on the desk and turned on my heel.

No one fucking threatened Ryan and lived.

I may not have been here to save him from those dipshit kids, but I was fucking here now, and as long as I was breathing, no one would ever speak about my man like that again.

I was going to kill Damian.

With veins pumped full of rage and a desperate sort of love, I felt confident for the first time in my life that I would be able to do it.

I would be able to sight down my gun and pull the fucking trigger, freeing myself and everyone I loved from Damian Ryker for good.

OceanofPDF.com

77



Cal Walker

When I pulled up to Apex, there was no guard at the gate. In fact, the entire place was quiet.

This whole thing was giving me serious ‘it’s a trap’ vibes, but I didn’t really fucking care.

Maybe I should have been more worried. Pickings were slim in terms of available weapons, though I did swipe a dope Glock 19 from the duffle of guns Vox brought with him. I knew he had a rifle, but I think he’d taken it with him on his daily neighborhood patrol.

I was happy to also find four gorgeous grenades tucked away in his duffle as well. Those went directly into a backpack.

I had needed to temporarily disable the motion detectors Vox had up around Fairview to get out undetected.

No one in that house would have been supportive of my little mission, not even my best friend. However, none of them knew what I was really capable of.

I didn't need more than a handgun to kill Damian. Not now that Vox had eliminated the threat against my sisters.

Damian had trained me to be a killer. Little did he know, he was creating the instrument of his own fucking demise.

The chain link gate opened as soon as my G-Wagon rolled up, telling me that Damian was watching through the cameras.

Not a surprise. I knew he would be. He was so cocky. He thought he had me completely under control. I was about to show him just how fucking wrong he was.

Pulling up to the imposing concrete structure, I hopped out of the wagon, dragging my backpack full of grenades out with me and slinging it over my shoulders.

No one met me at the front door.

No one searched me.

This, of course, was all intentional. Damian was reminding me of my place again. He didn't care if I was armed because I belonged to *him*. He *owned* me.

When Damian said *jump*, I asked how fucking high.

That was how it had always been.

'That's the way it will always be, Mr. Walker.'

The deeper I crept into Apex, the more aware I was that I was being watched. The cameras turned to follow me as I stalked through the seemingly deserted space, but I paid them no mind.

My boots moved silently as I stalked through the windowless hallways toward Damian's office. The closer I got, the more tense I became.

The familiar, unforgiving concrete walls and the harsh buzz of the fluorescent lights tapped into the part of my brain that had been molded and conditioned to obey the man I was now determined to kill.

Against my will, my heart rate sped up, and it was suddenly difficult for me to catch my breath. Sweat broke out on my forehead as I came to stand before the door to Damian's office, and I paused.

I could fucking do this.

The now-healed brand on my chest burned with phantom pain, and I clenched my teeth against it, forcing back the urge to fall back into old habits.

Slipping my hand into the back pocket of my jeans, I pulled out the photo Ryan had given me.

Glancing down at his big toothless grin and the insanely impressive flower sign he was proudly holding up for the camera, breathing became a little easier.

I remembered the rage that had ripped through me when he'd told me the story about those kids hurting him and calling him names.

My chest flooded with an aching throb of remorse.

I should have been there to save him.

Shoving the photo back into my pocket and glaring at the hard, steel door in front of me, I let out one more harsh breath.

If I could help it, Ryan would never be threatened again. Especially not because of me and my fucked up baggage.

This was it.

No going back now.

Without giving myself another second to think, I opened the door.

OceanofPDF.com

78



Cal Walker

Alexa, play: Cinema - Benny Benassi, Gary Go, Skrillex

“Hello, Mr. Walker.” Damian greeted me as I stepped into the cold, familiar space. He was sitting at his desk, the framed pictures of my sisters’ faces down next to him.

His voice slithered over me like a bad dream, and I shuddered. Flashbacks to him stroking my hair as I shook in that freezing tub slammed into me the moment our gaze met.

My fingers twitched as I slid the Glock 19 out of my waistband, pointing it directly at his head.

He smiled.

“Put down the gun, Callum,” he ordered calmly, and the command hit me like an electric shock.

My mind went completely blank for a second.

When everything blinked back into focus, I was pointing the gun at the floor by my side.

I frowned.

What the fuck?

With a hammering heart, I glanced back at Damian, gritting my teeth in frustration.

Did he have me so brainwashed that I physically couldn't stop myself from obeying?

Leaning on my newfound rage, I cocked the weapon and pointed it back at his head, snarling.

Focus, Cal. Fucking focus for once in your goddamn life!

Damian chuckled and stood up, slowly circling the desk with his hands in the pockets of his perfectly pressed Armani pants. He pulled out his little black remote, and suddenly, the office was filled with the familiar and now aching painful beat of 'Cinema' by Skrillex.

The music ricocheted through my skull, and suddenly, I was drowning.

McGreggor was spraying me in the face with the hose, and the brand was *burning, burning, burning...*

I couldn't breathe.

"Fuck..."

I blinked, shaking my head again, trying to get the flashback to subside.

My finger tensed on the trigger, and I tried to fight against the strange block in my brain that seemed to be preventing my finger from working.

"You're not going to shoot me, Callum," Ryker drawled. He was smirking in such an infuriating way. "But if it makes you feel better, you can keep pointing it at me."

My hand was shaking with the effort to pull the goddamn trigger, a literal bead of sweat formed on my brow as I fought with myself.

This was *Damian*.

As much as I fucking hated him, there was this seed of loyalty buried deep within my mind. He'd practically raised me. I had spent my formative years looking up to him and doing everything I could to win his approval.

What was I doing here?

I shook my head again, more roughly this time, desperately trying to beat back the doubts as they plagued my mind.

What had I been thinking? I couldn't kill Damian...

Yes, he was a little abusive, but he also *saved me*. It wasn't all bad. The bouts of torture had been few and far between, and they were always in response to something I had done wrong.

Damian continued to approach me slowly, his expression twisting into something that looked close to *hurt*.

Guilt tore through my gut, and I had the sudden, overwhelming urge to lower my gun again.

"Callum. I'm sorry. I know you're upset with me, and you're right to be. I went too far."

I couldn't even speak. Instead, I growled and switched to a double-handed grip on the Glock. I forced myself to keep the gun trained on him despite the fact that I was noticeably shaking now.

"Callum. Put the gun down. It's me." He reached forward and brushed his fingers over my cheek.

I was in a fucking trance. I couldn't tear my gaze away from his whiskey eyes.

"I'm sorry I lied to you."

That's right! That's why I was so mad; he lied about being involved with trafficking kids!

"You did lie," I snarled, and he nodded, inching even closer to me.

"I did, but I was just trying to teach you a lesson. You know you need more attention than the others, Callum. I was just trying to help you."

"What the fuck are you talking about!?" I rasped, ramming the nose of the gun into his chest.

What did child trafficking have to do with teaching me a lesson?

"You asked me if I loved you, and I said no," Damian whispered, stepping even closer into my personal space. He didn't seem concerned at all that I had a fully automatic pistol pressed directly against his shoulder.

"I was lying."

"Wh-what?" I choked.

There was a roaring in my ears.

No. No, no, no...

I suddenly knew what he was going to say, and I didn't want to fucking hear it.

I didn't want to hear the words 'I love you' for the first time from Damian Ryker.

He stroked my cheek and ran his thumb over my lips in a way that made my stomach churn. I had a brief flash of memory from the nightmare that had led to me almost killing Ryan.

I remembered Ryker's soft grunts and the sound of flesh hitting flesh.

Had he been... touching himself? To me being tortured?

Since I was a child?

Had I repressed that?

"I love you, Callum. I always have."

He was so close to me I could taste his breath. I couldn't move.

Why couldn't I fucking move!?

He leaned closer, and the thought of him putting his lips on me made something deep in my chest *snap*.

The idea of having to tell Ryan that this piece of shit kissed me made me feel so violently ill that whatever spell Damian had managed to cast on me broke.

Suddenly, I couldn't hear the dubstep anymore.

All I could hear was Ryan's voice echoing through my mind.

All the beautiful things he had ever said to me rolled through my mind, and my breath caught in my chest.

You're not a killer, Cal, not really.

You were made to help people, Cal. Not hurt them.

You try so hard to protect and help everyone around you, but who's protecting you?

Somewhere along the line, I had convinced myself that *Damian* had been the one protecting me... But that had never been the case.

He'd always been using me. Manipulating me... in more twisted ways than I ever gave him credit for.

He didn't *love* me.

He just knew how desperately I needed to hear it. This was another form of control.

Not anymore.

Ryan asked who was protecting me?

I was.

ME.

I would protect my goddamn self from this piece of shit the way little Cal never could.

I was Ryan's dark angel, and I was going to bring hell to fucking earth if that's what it took to keep us both safe from this monster.

Suddenly, all the barriers in my mind fell away, and my body snapped to attention.

The shaking was gone, and I felt a tranquil sense of calm wash over me.

As Damian leaned closer to me, I gave him my most seductive grin.

"You going to kiss me, Damian?"

He paused his advance, sensing that something had changed.

My grin widened, and without warning, I drew back my gun and cracked it across his face. He cried out and stumbled away from me. The shock on his face was one of the most satisfying things I'd ever seen.

Without waiting for him to recover, I unloaded the clip into his chest, enjoying the arc of blood that sprayed from him like a fucking garden hose.

"What the FUCK!" he cried as he went down. I reloaded the gun as I approached.

Fuck, it felt good to shoot him.

"Damn, Damian. I haven't killed anyone in a while. The amount of *dopamine* coursing through me right now... Woohooo!"

I did a little energetic jog in place, grinning down at him as he tried to crawl away from me, coughing up dark spurts of blood.

"You know how it is with me. Murder or sex. Murder or sex. Gotta be one or the other." I smirked, crouching down next to him so I could get nice and close.

I wanted to feel his brain spray across my face when I shot him in the head.

I pressed the gun against his temple and met his shocked, horrified gaze, unable to stop grinning at him.

"What am I saying? Of course you know. You fucking made me this way."

I delivered the words with an unhinged smile that was all promises and teeth,

"C-callum." He coughed, and I chuckled, pressing the gun more firmly into his head.

"Though, I haven't fucked in a while, which is technically your fault as well," I mused, enjoying the way he was trying to act like he had control of the situation while also shimmying away from me.

“I know, I know. You were willing to give it up just now.” I sighed, feigning interest. “But alas. I cannot indulge in whatever gherkin-sized weiner you’re overcompensating for with all these fancy suits.”

“Callum. Stop it.” He tried to sound commanding, but I just laughed. He had zero hold on me anymore. I was done with him *and* his fucking lies.

He’d pushed me too far, and there was no going back.

“Wanna know why? Hmmmm?” I chirped.

He just coughed up more blood, and I could barely get the words out because I was unable to keep the shit-eating grin off my face.

“‘Cause Ryan said no butt whores. And *you*, sir, are the literal *definition* of a butt whore.”

I cackled at my own joke and cocked the Glock.

“So I guess murder it is! Say bye-bye, Damian.” I smirked just as the door to the office busted open, and all hell broke loose.

OceanofPDF.com



Cal Walker

Alexa, Play: Suffocate - Kayzo, Bad Omens

One of Damian's goons crashed into the room, clutching an AK-47 and dressed in full SWAT gear.

Well. I guess now it's a party.

I smirked, twisting around and unloading the clip that was meant for Damian's head into the goon that interrupted my sweet, sweet revenge.

He went down with a shout, and before he could react, I was on him. His Kevlar vest meant he wouldn't die from the spray of bullets he had taken to the chest, but he was definitely winded.

Crushing my boot into his throat while he gasped against the vacuum I'm sure was wreaking havoc on his lungs, I ripped the AK out of his hands.

New toy for ya boy! Fucking sick!

"Your timing is *horrible*." I tsked, pointing the weapon at the man's face. I knew him. I think his name was Garret... Gary? Fuck it was on the

tip of my tongue...

"You're fucked, Callum. What did you think? That the boss was really going to let you come back without having anyone here to back him up?" Garret spat as I crushed the boot more firmly into his throat.

I rolled my eyes. "Whatever, Gary. You think I'm scared of *you* fucks? I'm not Daddy's favorite for nothing."

Slipping the Glock into my waistband, I crouched down next to him, making sure to keep my boot firmly planted on his trachea.

I slid out of my backpack and dug through it to find one of my handy zip ties I kept in here for just such an occasion. Quickly, I bound Buddy's hands before rummaging through the bag again until my fingers closed around one of Vox's grenades.

Ripping the pin out of it, I shoved it into Gerald's mouth, cackling to myself the whole time.

"Bite down. The longer you hold the lever down, the longer your brain stays intact... not that there's much there to begin with, but...you get it."

Grant's eyes widened in horror as I stood up, looking down at my work with a sadistic grin.

"You look good with that stuffed in your mouth... isn't that right, Damian?" I turned to look at Ryker, who was attempting to drag himself under his desk to get away from the live grenade.

He was pulling himself with one arm through a pool of his own blood that was growing by the second. I grinned. He wouldn't last much longer.

Even over the blaring dubstep, I could hear Gary's reinforcements coming down the hall, so I stepped over his prone form to peek out the door.

There were at least fifty guys charging down the hall. All in full gear.

I glanced back at Damian, who was barely moving now. I wasn't even sure he was conscious anymore.

"Aww. All this for little old me? I'm flattered." I smirked before turning back to glance out the door again.

I yanked out another grenade and ripped out the pin, hucking it down the hallway before tucking back into Damian's office.

"Three, two, one..." I counted smugly before an explosion went off, and screams ricocheted off the concrete walls.

Dust sprinkled down from the ceiling with the force of the explosion, and I chuckled.

That probably took care of most of them.

I dropped to the ground and barrel-rolled into the hallway, using the dust from the explosion as cover.

Most people's reflex is to aim and shoot at chest level. No one ever expects the threat to come from the ground. So, my appearance in the hallway went unnoticed for one long, precious second... one second that lost several guys their kneecaps.

Crawling on my elbows and knees, I grabbed one of Damian's fallen guys and ripped his utility knife out of his thigh sheath. Ramming the blade into the base of his skull, I severed his spinal cord.

He fell into my arms immediately, and I heaved him up with me.

Using him as a shield, I pointed my newly acquired AK around the body to unload more rounds into the group of men who were still struggling to recover from the grenade I had tossed at them.

Some of them fired back, but I used my new human shield to catch the bullets. I had just spent fucking six weeks healing a bullet wound; I wasn't about to suffer through another one.

Trying to stay as low as possible so I wouldn't choke on all the concrete dust in the air, I reloaded as quickly as I could manage with one hand.

Most of the dark forms before me were on the ground now. The entire hallway was filled with a cacophony of moans and screams, which told me that most of them were dying, if not already dead.

I had two more grenades, but I was really only gonna need one.

I grinned as I backed away from the wreckage, dragging my corpse of a shield with me. Tucking my AK under my arm, I slipped out one last grenade.

Pulling the pin out with my teeth, I surveyed the hallway, aiming as close to the door to Damian's office as possible.

My goal was to force Garrett to lose his grip on the bomb I had left in his mouth and take out everyone in one shot on my way out.

Resisting the urge to toss the grenade like I was Michael fucking Jordan shooting a buzzer-beater, I launched it with as much precision as possible. Dropping my human shield, I tore out of there the second the grenade left my fingertips.

I was already sliding out the front door and sprinting back to my car when the grenade went off. The explosion was loud enough that I heard it

from outside, and my grin grew even wider when a second explosion detonated minutes later.

BAHHHAHAHAH! Bye Gary!

Punching the ignition, I peeled out of the gravel parking lot and barreled toward the gate.

It wasn't unmanned anymore. A guard was frantically trying to shut the gate as I sped toward it. So much adrenaline and dopamine was ripping through me, I felt in-fucking-vincible.

I couldn't stop laughing as I slipped the muzzle of my AK out the driver's side window and lit up the guard just as my G-Wagon plowed through the chain link gate.

I whooped and hit the gas, speeding down the winding road back to the highway so fast the entire vehicle felt like it might topple every time I hit a corner.

I FUCKING DID IT!

I killed Damian!

My sisters were *safe!*

Ryan could open Fairview again... and we could live our lives without the threat of Damian Fucking Ryker breathing down our necks!

Smiling so fucking big that my face hurt, I glanced at the clock.

I had been in there longer than expected. The sun was beginning to set, which meant I needed to get a move on.

Hoping I could find a flower shop that was still open this late, I merged onto the highway, absolutely *buzzing* with excitement.

I couldn't wait to get home to tell my ginger snap that his dark angel had killed the bad guys, and everything was going to finally be ok.

80



Ryan Fairview

Alexa, Play: Wicked Games - Lusiant

I was a fucking nervous wreck.
Cal fucking *lied to me*.

He hadn't gone for a nap. I couldn't find him anywhere. After spending a few hours in the attic, I went to check on him and found our room empty.

After hunting through the entire house with no luck, I began to panic. I called his phone, but of course, he hadn't taken it with him wherever he'd gone. It was lying on his desk, unplugged from the charger for the first time in weeks.

I tried a few different number combos, trying to get through his passcode, but after a few incorrect tries, his phone locked me out from trying.

I was nearly in frantic, angry tears when Vox strolled in through the front door, clutching his rifle and looking pissed off.

He took one look at my face, and his expression darkened further.

“Cal’s missing!” I gasped, and Vox’s face drained of all color. His lip curled in agitation, and he stalked past me, making a beeline for the living room where all his tech was set up.

I followed him like a lost puppy and stood next to him as he threw himself on the couch and started tapping away on his laptop.

He clicked an app, and suddenly, all his monitors were full of what looked like camera feeds.

I blinked, completely taken aback.

This was...*my house!* There were cameras filming everything that happened in almost every room of the entire funeral home!

Including my bedroom and bathroom!

What the fuck!?

Vox hit a button, and the feeds rewound. I watched in complete astonishment as Cal walked up to his phone, read some messages, and then beelined for the living room.

He dug through Vox’s duffle, stuffed a gun in his waistband, and four black objects into a backpack. Then he stalked out of the house. I followed his dark figure from feed to feed as he exited the house, disarmed a motion detector on his way, then hopped into his car and sped away.

“What the fuck! Where the fuck is he going!?” I exclaimed out loud. My voice was embarrassingly high, and Vox shot me an annoyed look before pulling a pad of paper over to himself and scribbling a note.

‘Obviously Apex. I ran into some of Damian’s guys while on patrol. They’ve been eliminated, but I’m sure they were sent because Damian knew Cal wasn’t going to be here.’

“Why the fuck would he go to Apex?! After everything we’ve done to keep him safe! Why would he go back to that man?!”

I was completely gutted.

Was he going to be tortured again? *Killed?* Would I ever even see him again?

How could he leave like that without even saying goodbye?

Vox gave me a somewhat awkward yet sympathetic look. Like he knew I was about to cry but didn't really know what to do about it.

I was spiraling and literally shaking as my heart shattered into what felt like a million pieces in my chest when I heard the front door open.

Everyone should have been home except Cal, so both Vox and I nearly sprinted out of the living room to see who it was.

Vox cocked his rifle as we went, and panic coursed through me.

What if Vox missed some of Damian's men!? What if we were under attack!?

My fears died the moment my eyes fell on the cause of my mental fucking breakdown.

"Hey, ginger snap." Cal beamed at me as he stepped through the door.

He was backlit by a purple and orange sunset, his almost black hair glowing chestnut brown where the light hit it.

My eyes flew over his body from head to toe, frantically looking for any sign of injury or distress.

His usual all-black clothes were covered in fine grey dust, and he had a smear of blood on his cheek and on his fingers.

In one hand, he was clutching a very large, scary-looking gun. In his other hand, he had a bouquet of lilies.

He kicked the door shut behind him, giving Vox and me an easy grin as he stepped forward.

The initial shock of seeing him back and in one piece wore off, and I was suddenly *pissed*.

"Where the *fuck* have you been!" I barked, rushing forward and shoving him roughly with both hands.

He cocked his head to the side, frowning at me.

"I was just—"

"How *dare* you scare me like that!" I was shouting now, and I shoved him again, angry tears burning in my eyes.

Cal glanced at Vox, but Vox crossed his arms and scowled at Cal, clearly just as pissed off as I was.

"Awh, come on, baby, I didn't mean to scare you," he said, pouting. "I knew you might be upset with me... Look, I brought you flowers."

He tried to hand me the bouquet, but I snatched them up and tossed them onto one of the antique tables that garnished the front foyer.

“Don’t you *baby* me!” I snarled, trying to shove him again but failing. He stepped easily out of the way, handing the large gun to Vox, who begrudgingly took it from him. Next, he shrugged out of his backpack and handed that to Vox as well.

“Saved you one.” He winked. Vox just narrowed his eyes at Cal before shoving his finger in his face angrily.

‘*We’re not done here*’ was the overall tone of Vox’s expression. For a minute, I thought they were going to get into it, but Vox just shot me a ‘*he’s your problem now*’ shrug and stalked back into the living room.

Great. No friends among thieves... or mercenaries, I guess.

“Ryan, baby, come here,” Cal said, turning to face me, but I was still furious.

I threw a punch at him, and he barked out a laugh, catching it easily in his bloody hand. He wrapped his fingers around my fist and jerked me into him.

“I’m *sorry*, okay? I couldn’t tell you where I was going. You thought I was going to overt-exert myself by giving you a *blowjob*. There’s no way you would have let me go back to kill him. I had to sneak away.”

“If you have to *lie* to me to get your way, then that should be a pretty good indicator that your idea is fucking *stupid*!”

“I didn’t lie! I just... left.”

“You said you were going to rest!”

He rolled his eyes, though he was smiling at me in the most endearing way. My resolve was already fading.

He slid his hands around my hips and thumbed up the hemline of my T-shirt, brushing his fingers over the sensitive skin of my abdomen.

“Baby... when have I ever voluntarily gone to *rest*? Come on, that wasn’t even believable.”

I snorted, my face burning from both my raging emotions and the light circles he was now tracing beneath my T-shirt. The blood that had been pumping my heart full of anxiety and anger was now shooting directly toward my dick, and I was having a hard time staying angry.

“Besides...” He leaned forward and brushed a soft kiss on my lips. Even covered in debris and blood, he smelled like Cal, and I couldn’t help

but wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him back. He grinned against me and pulled away just enough that our noses were touching.

“It was worth it. He’s dead, Ryan. I killed him. You can open back up whenever you’re ready.”

“Wh-what?” I gasped. But instead of answering me, he took my open mouth as an invitation to slip his tongue past my lips, closing his mouth over mine.

He dug his fingers into the skin on my waist, and I groaned into him as he kissed me painfully slowly... like we had all the time in the world.

He slid his hands over my ass and down my thighs, and before I knew what was happening, he hiked me up off the ground and forced me to wrap my legs around his waist. He didn’t even break our kiss.

I pulled away from him in shock, gasping for air.

“Callum! Put me down! This definitely counts as strenuous activity!”

My voice sounded just as panicked as I felt, but he just chuckled and began to make his way to the stairs.

I was not a short man. Carrying me like this was definitely not easy, even though Cal had several inches on me. However, he barely seemed winded as he held me up, kissing me over and over again on the way to our room.

“Baby, I just killed like fifty mercenaries and the leader of an underground trafficking ring. If I can survive all that, then I’m more than healthy enough to carry my man to bed.”

Kicking the door to the bedroom closed behind us, he sat me down on the edge of the bed in question.

My heart was suddenly pounding again, but this time for a different reason.

The amusement was gone from Cal’s face, and his eyes were now dark with lust and a primal sort of need.

My cock swelled between my legs as he peeled my T-shirt off without asking permission.

“You did all that?” I whispered, absolutely amazed that he was capable of such a thing while also somehow *so fucking turned on*.

He nodded, brushing his thumb over my lips, before sliding his hand around my nape and resting his forehead against mine.

“Yes, Ryan.” He closed his eyes and inhaled as if he were breathing me in. “And I would do it again. I couldn’t allow you to keep putting Fairview

at risk because of me and all my baggage.” Opening his eyes, he pinned me with an intense look full of so much emotion that I found myself swallowing back what felt like another rush of tears. “I want to be the person you count on to help you achieve your dreams, not the reason they go up in flames.”

I choked, and he made a soothing ‘*shhh*’ noise, dropping a damp kiss on my lips.

“I’m sorry it took me so long to get here, baby,” he whispered, ghosting his thumb over my mouth again. I knew he wasn’t talking about coming back from his mission.

“You got here as fast as you could.” I hummed as his warm, minty breath mingled with mine. My whole body was buzzing with his proximity, and my skin erupted in gooseflesh in anticipation of his touch.

He nodded. “I did. But now that I’m here, I’ll never allow anyone to threaten you again. You’re not alone anymore, Ryan. You have me now. Do you hear me?”

I met his warm brown eyes head-on and nodded, feeling too overcome with emotion to speak.

“Good.” He kissed me again, holding my head steady in his large hands so I couldn’t get away while he devoured my mouth.

I could taste the mint on his breath, and I whimpered as he rubbed his tongue possessively against mine.

“I don’t want to wait anymore, Ryan. Will you let me have you? Please, baby?”

I nodded again, completely unable to deny him anything at this moment.

“I’m already yours, Callum,” I whispered, and he gave me a slow, gorgeous smile before sealing his lips to mine.



OceanofPDF.com

81



Ryan Fairview

Alexa, Play: I feel like I'm drownin' - Two Feet

“Take off your pants, baby,” Cal cooed. He straightened before me and crossed his arms, grabbing his hoodie by the hem and tugging it over his head.

My mouth watered at the sight of his perfectly sculpted chest and chiseled abs. Greedily, I allowed my gaze to follow the delicious V that sunk into his black jeans, which were tented with his massive, hard cock.

He watched me with dark, hooded eyes as I scrambled to do as he said. I slipped my jeans and my boxers off in one go, and my cock sprang out as I kicked my pants off. It was already leaking and was feeling so sensitive I was worried suddenly I wouldn't be able to last very long.

Cal's eyes were trained directly on my cock as he ran his tongue over his lower lip, sucking his lip ring into his mouth.

“Fucking *gorgeous*, Ryan...” He breathed, stepping forward between my legs. “Get on the bed. Lie down,” he ordered softly, pushing me back until I was leaning on my elbows. He crawled onto the bed, slowly undoing his pants as he prowled over my naked body.

He hovered over me, and I could feel the heat radiating off of him as he slid out of his own jeans, kicking them off the bed.

My cock was leaking all over my abdomen, and it released another unprompted gush as his heavy dick fell against mine.

I groaned as the velvet-soft skin of his shaft rubbed up against my sensitive cock, and he smiled.

“You’re leaking for me, baby,” he purred before scooping up both of our dicks in one of his large tattooed hands.

He pumped both our dicks together, and I stared down at where our bodies were connected, marveling at the pearly beads of cum that were leaking from the tip of my dick just from him *touching* me.

Already, the base of my spine was tingling, and my breathing was getting choppy.

“Cal... *fuck*. I don’t think I’m going to last...” I gasped.

“Shhhh... Shhhh, shhh, shhh.” He ran his finger over the heads of both our cocks, swiping up some pre-cum before pressing his now wet finger to my lips. “You’re not going to come until I say. Right, sweet boy?” he purred, and the way he said it just made my cock throb harder.

“Here, taste how good we are together.” He murmured, pressing his finger into my mouth. I parted my lips to let him in, obediently sucking our combined cum off my finger and shuddering at the salty, erotic taste.

“Such a good boy...” He hummed before sitting back on his heels and taking his thick, pierced dick with him. I whimpered in protest, but he paid me no mind.

My cheeks flushed as he wrapped his hands around my ankles and bent my legs, pressing my knees up to my shoulders.

“Cal...” I protested, feeling every bit as exposed as I was, but again he ignored me. Sucking on his lip ring, he examined my spread ass with a look of pure devotion on his face.

“Hold your legs like this for me, ginger snap,” he murmured, and I did what he said despite the way my cheeks were burning at being so exposed.

My heart was pounding in my chest as he stared at me, leisurely stroking his cock.

Was he going to fuck me?

My cock leaked more pre-cum at the thought. Staring at his massive dick, I nearly groaned out loud at the thought of him putting that thing inside me.

Pleasepleasepleaseplease.

Please put it inside me.

“You want me to fuck this sweet little hole, baby?” he asked softly, ghosting his thumb over it, causing me to jerk with anticipation.

“Yes... Cal, *please*.”

He glanced up to meet my gaze. I expected him to give me one of his goofy smiles, but he didn't. His expression was the most serious I had ever seen.

He licked his lips and nodded.

“I will, baby. I promise. But first, let's have a taste.”

To my complete and utter shock, he bent down and sealed his lips over my hole. I jerked and moaned as he circled it with his scorching hot, wet tongue.

My cock literally *surged* forward on its own accord, lifting right off my abdomen as it somehow grew even harder.

Cum was streaming out of my tip at a continuous rate as Cal relentlessly lashed his tongue against my asshole.

“Cal, fuck...*fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck!*” I cried out, and he growled, running his tongue up from my hole to my balls and sucking them into his mouth firmly.

“Does that feel good, baby?” he asked, his voice rough with need. “You like having my tongue in your sweet little ass?”

“I'm going to come...I'm going to fucking come!” I chanted, and to my complete devastation, he pulled away, pinching the base of my dick so hard I could feel my pulse in my ball sack.

“No coming, baby. Not yet. I'm not finished with you,” he purred, and I groaned as my cock grew so full it felt like it might literally burst.

I was panting and out of my mind with need while he sat and watched me squirm beneath his grip. He made more soothing sounds as he waited for me to come down enough for him to continue.

When he was sure I wasn't going to come, he took my hand and guided it to replace his.

“Hold here, sweet thing. If you think you’re going to come, pinch with this hand and tap my head with your other hand. I’ll stop.”

I didn’t want him to fucking stop. I wanted to fucking come!

I groaned and shivered in agony, and his chocolate eyes met mine through my spread legs. His mouth was cut into a hard line as if he could read my thoughts.

“You better stop me before you come, Ryan, or I won’t be happy with you. I want tonight to be about making you feel good. I don’t want to have to punish you, but I will if you make me. Do you understand?”

I nodded frantically, nearly choking in my rush to reply. “Yes. Yes. I promise. I won’t come until you say. Just *please* don’t stop.”

He smiled at me, blowing gently on my swollen and sensitive balls before setting his sights on my asshole again.

“I love it when you beg, baby.”

And then, he was licking me again, and I pinched the base of my dick like my life depended on it, doing everything in my power not to come before my dark angel said I could.

OceanofPDF.com

82



Cal Walker

Alexa, play: Unfolding - Luca Folgale

I felt like I just dropped the cleanest ecstasy ever.

Instead, I was eating my perfect ginger snap's ass.

He was fucking *loving* every second of it too. I almost felt bad every time I looked up to see how hard he needed to squeeze his cock to keep himself from coming...*almost*.

I wanted this moment to last forever, and as much as I knew I would be able to work him up to a round two—and maybe three and four—I wasn't ready to lose the absolute desperate look of need that came with the first time.

I speared my tongue into his ass, working through the thick ring of muscle and gently stretching his hole to get him ready for what was to come.

Taking my time with him, I gripped each of his cheeks and spread him wide, ruthlessly fucking him with my tongue until he was a whiney, needy mess. He wasn't even capable of forming real words by the time I had my fill and was ready to move on to more... *intense* prep tactics.

Pulling away from his delicious ass, I looked down at him through heavy-lidded eyes, pausing to stroke my own rock-hard cock at the sight of him blushing and pink before me.

His dick was so full and heavy. The damn thing was nearly purple from the amount of times it had been denied an orgasm. I smiled.

It looked like he might explode at the slightest touch, and that was just what I wanted.

I wouldn't be touching his dick again until I was ready for him to come, and neither would he.

"Slide further up," I ordered, and he released his grip on the base of his cock, scrambling to do as I said. I followed him up to the head of the bed and reached into the end table drawer, shifting around until I found a bottle of Astroglide.

"Pull your legs back up for me, baby," I murmured, squirting a generous line of lube on my fingers before sidling back up to Ryan's ass.

He was a vision, spread out before me like this. How many nights had I dreamed about having him willing and waiting for me to fuck him in this exact position?

Too many.

I felt like I was having an out-of-body experience as I squirted more lube directly on his asshole. He jumped slightly, and I grinned.

"Was that cold, baby?"

He nodded, his eyes wide and chest rising and falling rapidly with each breath.

"Sorry. We need to make sure you're nice and prepped. I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't," he said with confidence, which made my smile widen.

I rubbed the pads of my lubed-up fingers against his asshole and leaned forward so I could look him in the eyes while I fingered him.

"Mmmm. You're so slippery right now," I purred, adding pressure until one finger slid into the first knuckle.

"*Mmmphhh, god-FUCK!*" Ryan cried out as I slowly pumped in and out of him.

I watched his cock bob, looking out for any signs he might blow before I was ready for him, but he managed to keep it together.

“Good job, baby. You’re doing so well,” I praised him. “Keep it up. I’m going to add another finger.”

“Cal... please... just fuck me!” he cried out, and I chuckled, shaking my head.

“Soon, baby. Soon.” I slipped in another, reveling in his tight heat as I scissored my fingers inside of him, doing my best to stretch him as gently but as quickly as possible.

He was so needy and impatient I didn’t want to keep him waiting any longer than he had to.

“One more...” I hummed before shoving a third finger into him. He let out a ragged groan and then almost snarled at me.

“There... I’m prepped enough. Please, Cal, fuck me. I need to feel you inside me.”

I couldn’t listen to his begging anymore without giving him exactly what he needed. Despite the fact that he probably could have used a bit more prep, especially for his first time, I found myself nodding.

“Okay, baby. You know I can’t say no to you.”

Squirting more Astroglide all over my dick and pumping it a few times to make sure I was coated, I lined the tip of my cock up with his ass. I held myself over him with a palm by his head and used my other hand to guide my pierced tip to his hole.

“Take a deep breath for me, baby; make sure you’re relaxed.”

“Just do it, Cal,” he groaned before leaning up and biting down on my chin, as it was the only thing he could reach.

“Okay, baby, here it comes,” I whispered as I slowly pressed against his asshole.

The head of my cock slipped passed the tight barrier with a *popping* sensation, and fucking *fireworks* exploded across my vision as his heat enveloped my tip.

We both groaned simultaneously as I penetrated him, and it took everything in me not to sink in all the way to my nuts. Instead, I paused and gripped Ryan’s jaw with the hand that I wasn’t using to hold myself up.

His eyes went blank for a moment, and his mouth parted as he adjusted to the new sensation. A powerful and profound sense of protectiveness rolled through me at the sight of him so vulnerable and prone beneath me.

He trusted me with this.

No one else had ever been inside Ryan like this. Just me.

A burning sensation welled behind my eyes at the realization that while sex for me had always been treated like a basic need, this was something extremely special for Ryan, and I was *so fucking honored* that he had chosen me to experience it with him for the first time.

That coupled with the fact that this was special for me, too.

This was also my first time, in a way.

It was my first time having sex with someone I was in love with, and the moment I realized that, I began to shake.

Awareness seeped back into Ryan's stunned gaze, and he wrapped his legs around my hips, urging me closer.

"You okay, baby?" I whispered, and he threaded his fingers around the back of my neck. Tugging my hair as he pulled my forehead to rest against his.

He swallowed thickly and nodded.

"Yeah. Go deeper. I want more." He nipped my lips and licked and sucked at my lip ring as I allowed myself to slip deeper into his scorching hot channel.

"Fuck baby, you're so tight. You feel like fucking *heaven*," I murmured, barely even registering the words as they left my mouth.

Ryan's dick surged between us as the head of my cock squeezed past his prostate. He let out a high-keened wail, and his entire body locked up as pleasure rolled through him.

I pinched the base of his dick again, just in time to keep him from exploding.

"Not yet, baby, not yet..." I rasped, and he whimpered beneath me, his cock leaking a steady stream of cum as if he were experiencing a slow and constant state of release.

After another moment of excruciatingly slow movement, I bottomed out.

My hips pressed into his ass cheeks as I fully settled into him, and I dropped kiss after kiss on his face.

"Cal..." he whined, and as much as I was dying to pull back out and slam back into his sweet heat, I forced myself to stay completely still so he could adjust to me being inside him.

I held myself over him on my elbows, stroking his ginger hair out of his gorgeous, brandy eyes, and took a moment to appreciate the fact that *I was inside Ryan Fairview*.

“Cal...” he repeated, and I brushed a soft kiss against his lips.

“Yeah, baby? You alright?” I asked, my voice rough and raw.

He nodded, his eyes half closed and dark with lust.

“Yeah, I just... I love having you inside of me.”

So many overwhelming emotions swelled through my chest as he looked up at me with those big, trusting eyes. His cheeks were flushed, and he was clenched around me so tightly that I never wanted to pull out.

I just wanted to live inside him forever.

Suddenly, my mouth was moving, and I was saying things before my brain even caught up to what my heart wanted.

“Ryan, I —” I stopped myself and closed my eyes, biting back the words that I always seemed to say but never seemed to be returned.

I couldn’t say them now. Who the fuck said that shit to someone when they were balls deep in them for the first time?

Feeling stupid and vulnerable, I let out a breath just as Ryan’s fingers brushed gently across my cheek.

“What is it?” he whispered, grazing his thumb tenderly over my jawbone.

“Nothing, it’s stupid,” I croaked.

“Tell me.”

I met his gaze, and I felt my own eyes bounce back and forth between his. He was looking at me with so much raw intensity that I thought maybe it was okay to tell him. Even if he didn’t feel the same way, he wouldn’t make me feel bad about it like Damian did. He would never want to hurt me.

“Ryan I... I’m in love with you.” The words felt so right spilling from my lips, and his eyes widened slightly in surprise. His mouth parted, and I knew he wasn’t going to say it back. I told myself it was okay. At least he knew how I felt. That was enough.

I gave him a sad smile and rubbed my nose against his.

“It’s okay if you don’t love me back. I just wanted you to know,” I whispered before pulling away.

I didn’t make it very far. He squeezed his legs into my hips, slamming me back into him and gripping my face between his hands. When he spoke,

his voice came out in this pained, delicious rasp that I wished I could bottle up and sell.

“Callum. Of course I love you. How could I not?”

His words crashed into me, and suddenly, my eyes were filled with tears, and I choked on a painful lump that had gathered in my throat.

“No one ever has before,” I whispered, and for a moment, he looked furious.

“Then they’re idiots,” he snapped, kissing me fiercely on the lips. “I love you so much, Callum Walker. I can’t believe I spent twenty-eight years of my life without you in it. But now that you’re here, I don’t want to ever spend another day without seeing your gorgeous face.”

I searched his eyes, feeling like I could both whoop with joy and break down into tears at the same time when he pressed another wet kiss on my lips.

“I love you, Callum. Now fuck me, *please*. Fuck me like you love me back.”

It was like a reflex. Suddenly I was fisting his hair and sliding out of him, only to sink back down as deep as our bodies would allow.

“JesusfuckingChristttt,” Ryan groaned as I speared through his tight, hot ass with my aching cock.

I froze, glancing down at him with concern.

“I’m sorry baby, did I —”

“Fuck, Cal, don’t stop, *please don’t stop!*” he begged, and I grinned, biting down on his shoulder as I slammed back into him.

I ground myself deep, making sure to rub against his hard leaking cock as I did so.

“Tell me you love me again,” I growled into his ear, pinching the base of his cock as I slid in and out of him.

He nearly sobbed as he choked out the words I had been waiting my whole fucking life to hear.

“I love you! I love you, baby. Please, *please* let me come.”

“You wanna come?” I asked as I fucked him harder, and he nodded, basically sobbing in ecstasy beneath me.

“Alright, baby. You can come. Come for me, gorgeous. I want to watch you blow while I fill up your perfect, tight little ass.” I let go of his dick and angled my hips in such a way that I knew my cockhead would drag against his prostate with each thrust.

My entire body began to tingle, and fire exploded through my veins as my balls drew up tight against me.

“Now, Ryan. Come!” I ordered, just as my own climax hit me.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck! I’m fucking *coming!*” Ryan cried out as his ass clenched down on me. His cock exploded, and thick ropes of hot cum shot up between us.

I felt his release spurt up my chest and coat the underside of my jaw. Some painted Ryan’s neck and chin as he came, and I rode his ass raw until we were both completely spent.

“Fuck baby...” I panted. “You came so good for me.”

I licked and sucked the cum up off his neck and his chin, running my tongue over the rough stubble there before biting him gently on the ear.

“I feel like I’m floating...holy fuck...” Ryan gasped. I spread out on top of him, enjoying the slick feeling of his naked, sweat-coated body resting beneath me.

My dick was slowly softening in his ass, but I wasn’t ready to pull out of him.

I just wanted to lie here, connected forever.

Resting my head in the crook of his neck, I kissed him delicately while he stroked his hand through my damp hair.

He turned his head to look at me, his cheeks flushed and his shy-guy smile back on his face.

“Did you... did you mean all that? Do you really love me?” he asked, his voice soft and delicate.

My heart squeezed in my chest, and I choked on a rough laugh.

“I feel like I should be asking you that, ginger snap.”

He frowned at me as I pushed off of him, finally sliding out of his ass.

I leaned back to watch my cum drip out of him and shuddered in pleasure, another throb of need already hitting my spent dick.

Fuck that looked good.

“Why would you say that? You don’t believe that I love you?”

I cocked my head and gave him a small grin.

“I don’t know. It feels hard to believe. If you just said it in the heat of the moment, that’s okay, baby.” I reached out to cup his cheek, hating the perplexed look on his face.

“Did you just say it in the heat of the moment?!”

“What?! No! I meant every word... But I get it if you can’t love me back. I’m not an easy person to love,” I whispered.

“Now, *who* on earth made you believe that?” he asked, looking like he wanted to kill whoever made me feel the way I was feeling. I shrugged and cut him a smirk.

“Come on, Ryan. Even you took a while to warm up to me.”

He scoffed and scooped closer, resting a palm on each of my cheeks and looking me in the eyes.

“That’s because I’m an anxiety-ridden perfectionist who fears change,” he pointed out matter-of-factly, the corner of his mouth tilting up. “Not because there’s anything wrong with *you*.”

I chuckled but raised a skeptical eyebrow.

“Oh yeah?”

Ryan nodded solemnly. “Yeah. It took me like a month to warm up to our new coffee maker... but eventually I got there.” He winked and brushed his thumb over my lip ring.

“I may not have had it quite as bad as you and your sisters, but my life hasn’t been all sunshine and rainbows, Cal.”

“I know what it is to make tough choices and live through difficult times. I know what *hard* is... Loving you isn’t *hard*, Callum,” he whispered, leaning forward and brushing his lips against mine. “Loving you is the easiest thing I’ve ever done.”

83



Cal Walker

Ryan and I cuddled, then fell asleep together. I had no nightmares, and all the trauma I suffered from the bullshit Damian put me through was healed overnight, and we all lived happily ever after.

Just kidding.

That's not how anything actually works... unfortunately.

Despite how amazing the sex had been with Ryan, I had horrible dreams that night.

My nightmare had shifted again. Now, the version of Damian that touched himself while McGregor branded me was burnt up from the grenade I had killed him with.

'How could you do this to me, Callum? After everything I've done for you?'

His voice sounded like my mother's voice as he stroked his horribly burnt and scarred cock. Blood and puss were leaking from his eyes, and I screamed and screamed as McGregor pressed the brand harder into my chest.

When Ryan tried to wake me up, I attacked him again.

Thankfully, he was ready for me this time, and I wasn't able to actually hurt him, but the guilt I felt was enormous.

I didn't want to *ever* hurt Ryan. Not unless he was begging me for it.

I wanted to be his protector. His dark angel.

It felt like a sick joke that the only person I needed to protect him from was my fucking self.

On top of that, now that Apex was gone, I had no idea what to do with myself. Apex was all I had ever known, and now that Damian was dead, I felt lost.

What was my purpose? What good was someone like me to society?

I'd never gone to school. The only skill I had was killing people, and Ryan didn't want me to do that anymore.

If I was being honest, *I* didn't really want to do that anymore.

For the first time in my life, if I had to pick between murder and sex, I would pick sex every time. As long as it was with my perfect, sweet ginger boy and his *insanely* tight ass.

I had never needed to make decisions like this for myself, so I was feeling particularly lost and anxious when Ryan woke me up the next morning.

"How was the rest of your sleep?" he asked, stroking the side of my face and leaving toe-curling, gentle kisses along the side of my jaw.

"Would have been better if you let me sleep in the car." I pouted, giving him a grumpy look. After Ryan had convinced me to come back to bed, the rest of my night had been restless. I'd tossed and turned all night, worried I would try to hurt him again in my sleep.

He scoffed.

"We've discussed this." Ryan rolled away from me and hopped out of bed. I shamelessly stared at his bubbly, freckled ass as he pulled on a clean pair of boxers.

I sighed and sat up in bed, running my hands down my face in frustration.

"Baby, it's not safe for me to sleep next to you. I could seriously hurt you."

"You're not going to hurt me, Callum." He brushed me off as he bustled around the room doing his neurotic little Ryan things he did every morning.

“Get out of bed so I can make it,” he snipped. I could tell by his tone that he was annoyed with my pushback on our sleeping arrangements.

I smirked as he gathered the obscene amount of throw pillows that he diligently arranged on the bed every day. Wanting to both make a point and fuck with him a little, I did as he asked and got up.

I didn’t rush to get dressed like he had. Instead, I prowled naked around the bed as he scurried about the massive California King.

He was fluffing a particularly large throw pillow when I pounced on him from behind.

“Arrrgh!” he cried out in surprise. I flipped him around and crawled on top of him. Wrapping a hand around his throat, I smirked down at him as he squirmed beneath me.

His cock swelled in his jeans, and I cursed myself for not pouncing on him before he got dressed.

“I’m still dangerous, Ryan. Of course I could hurt you,” I purred before leaning forward and running my tongue firmly up the side of his face.

He groaned and rolled his hips, which only made my cock grow hard in response.

He gave me a devious smirk that I wasn’t expecting and slid his hand in between us, wrapping his fingers around my dick and stroking me firmly.

“*Fuck...*” I groaned, thrusting my hips into his warm hand.

“I know you could. But you won’t. Not like that.”

What had we been talking about again?

Oh right. Me accidentally killing the love of my life in my sleep.

“You don’t know that,” I growled, snatching up his hand and slamming it down next to his head. “When I’m triggered, I’m not in control... even before... what I did to you in the prep room. It’s like my mind goes blank, and I black out. I’ll never forgive myself if I hurt you, Ryan.”

The playful heat that had been brewing faded as his expression sombered.

“You’re afraid, and I don’t blame you,” he said softly, and I scowled.

“I am not *afraid*.”

He chuckled softly, but there was no joy in it.

“You are, and that’s okay, angel. Your whole life just changed overnight, and now you have to face everything that’s been done to you. I would be shocked if you weren’t afraid. But we’ll figure this out together. Yes, you

have triggers, but we'll work together to overcome them. It'll take time, but we have all the time in the world now."

"You're much too calm and logical." I snarked, though I was grinning now.

He shrugged, well, as much as he could with the way I had him pinned to the bed.

"I would apologize, but one of us has to think things through. I love you, baby, but you're not exactly *methodical*. You're the most impulsive person I've ever met."

His eyes were sparkling with mischief, and I tightened my hold on his throat, unable to stop the grin that spread across my face.

I was never going to get tired of him telling me he loved me.

"Is that so?" I teased. He opened his mouth to respond, but whatever he was going to say was cut off as I flipped him over and yanked his jeans down.

"Hey! What the fuck —"

"Well, I just had the *impulse* to fuck your ass raw."

"Cal! I just made the bed —" He squirmed beneath me in protest, but I wasn't having any of it.

I slapped him hard enough that he yelped.

"You want me to work to overcome my triggers, baby?" I asked gruffly, snatching the lube off the end table and coating Ryan's crack with it.

He wasn't fighting me anymore. Instead, he was arching his back, wiggling his hips toward me. My heart fluttered in my chest at how ready and willing he was to let me take him.

Fuck, I didn't deserve this man.

"Yes, angel. I want to help you in any way you need." His beautiful words were at odds with the huskiness of his voice. I ran my fingers up and down his slippery crack before slipping them into him without warning.

"*Mmpphh, fuck!*" he shouted as I pumped in and out of him. He was still soft from all the dick he'd taken last night, and my cock began to leak at the thought of sinking into him again.

"My urges aren't just going to go away, Ryan," I warned him, curling my fingers into the button deep inside him that made his cock fucking *weep* for me.

He couldn't reply; he only groaned and ground his hips into the bed.

“If I can’t kill people, I’m going to need another outlet,” I growled. I could feel the darkness I’d been repressing curl in my chest. “Are you going to let me use you the way I need, baby?”

“Fuck, yes, Callum...” Ryan whined. “Use me.”

An approving rumble grew in my chest, and I pulled my fingers out of him. He whimpered in protest, but I was already too far gone to feel bad.

I was a sadist. I knew I was.

It wasn’t clear to me whether I had always been like this or if Damian had made me this way, but it didn’t matter.

The fact was, I needed to inflict pain on others. It allowed me to feel in control of my otherwise out-of-control life. Ryan was offering himself up to be that person for me, but I wasn’t sure he knew what that entailed.

The amount of fucked up shit I wanted to do to him was so far removed from what most people considered to be acceptable during sex, and I was worried I would scare him away if I really let my monster out.

“Knees on the bed. Spread yourself open for me,” I ordered.

He hesitated, but it was only for a second. He kicked his jeans off and rushed to do as I said.

I didn’t think it was possible, but my cock got even harder. His obedience turned me on so fucking much. When he spread his cheeks open, exposing his pink, swollen hole to me, I nearly blew just from the sight of it.

“If we’re going to do this, we’re going to need a safe word. Yours is red,” I said, running my thumb over his exposed hole. More cum leaked out of me as I watched him clench at my touch. “Do you understand?”

“Yes,” he gasped as I continued to gently stroke him.

“I’m not going to hurt you today, but I will need to hurt someone soon, Ryan. The longer I go without it, the more dangerous I’ll be,” I warned him as I crawled onto the bed behind him.

“I don’t want to share you with anyone else, Callum. If you need to hurt someone, I want it to be me,” he whispered, and I felt a rush of dopamine course through me at his words.

Did he really feel so possessive over me that he didn’t even want to share my sadistic tendencies?

Why was that so fucking cute?!

I rubbed my cock up and down his crack, squeezing more lube on my dick as I teased him.

“Soon, baby,” I whispered, lining myself up with his hole.

As much as I loved him for offering himself to me as a way to fill my dark needs, I only wanted to hurt him in a way I thought he would like. The fear I felt that I may lose control and take things too far wasn’t like anything I’d ever felt before.

Why was loving someone so fucking terrifying?

“Right now, I just want to make you feel good,” I murmured. “Keep those cheeks spread for me, sweet thing. I’m going to fuck you till you come all over this neatly made bed.”

He made a protesting sound that quickly turned into a guttural moan as I slid my cock deep inside him.

“Fuuuckkk... baby, you feel so *good*.” I groaned, wrapping my hands around his hips. He was still holding himself open for me, just like I’d asked. It was such a fucking turn-on, and my balls throbbed.

I slid my right hand around him and fisted his cock. It was hard as stone, and a quick swipe of his crown left my fingers covered in precum.

“Fuck, Ryan... You’re leaking for me...” I growled, pulling back and snapping my hips into him.

“Unnnngggg, fuckkk.” He groaned as I fucked and stroked him at the same time.

“That feel good, baby?”

“Yes, fuck, please, Cal. Don’t stop,” he whined, and I grinned.

“I want you to be leaking my cum out of this asshole at breakfast. You’re going to feel me inside you all day, gorgeous. Because you’re *mine*.”

He nodded frantically, his groans coming out muffled from the way his face was pressed into the bed.

“All yours. I’m all yours,” he agreed, and I felt my balls draw up at his words.

“Tell me you love me,” I hissed, fighting the orgasm that was already building. His ass was so tight and hot; every flick of my hips was driving me closer and closer to the mind-numbing nirvana that only Ryan could give me.

“I love you, Cal. I fucking love you.” He sobbed, and I slid my hand down his cock to roughly tug on his tight balls.

“Good boy, Ryan. You’re so fucking good.” I groaned, fucking into him harder. “You going to come for me, gorgeous? You going to paint these

fucking sheets?”

“Yes, *please, fuck, fuck, fuck*. Cal, I’m going to —”

“Do it, baby. Show me how good it feels,” I ordered, and as soon as the words left my mouth, he exploded in my hand. I caught the first burst and used it as lube to jack him through the rest of his orgasm. It didn’t take long for my own climax to catch me.

“Fuck yes, Ryan.” I gasped as I emptied my load into his tight, perfect ass. “Take it, baby. Take my cum.”

He whined and whimpered, his ass convulsing around my cock as I shuddered behind him, completely lost in my release.

I collapsed on top of him, decorating the backs of his shoulders with soft kisses.

He let out a happy little satisfied moan as I buried my face in his neck.

“I love you, too,” I whispered.

“I know you do, angel.”

There was a beat of silence, and he let me just lie on him, hugging him into my chest as we came down from our highs. After a moment of catching my breath, I forced myself to be honest with both him and myself.

If he was going to give himself to me in the way he had just promised, he deserved that much, at least.

“You’re right. I am scared,” I admitted, and he shifted, rolling onto his back, causing me to slide out of him.

“I’m so afraid I’m going to take things too far, and you’re going to leave me.”

He brushed my hair out of my eyes, dropping a gentle kiss on my lips.

“That’s not going to happen.”

“What if I accidentally hurt you too much, and you hate me?”

He frowned. “I could never hate you, Cal. That’s impossible.”

“You don’t know that, Ryan. I’m... broken. I have darkness in me.”

He ran his fingers through my hair and kissed me again. My heart fluttered, and I closed my eyes, unable to keep myself from melting into him.

“If you ever get lost in the dark, I’ll make sure you find your way back, angel,” he whispered, gently sucking on my lip ring in that sweet way he now seemed to have a habit of doing.

“You will?” I asked, my voice gruff and my throat tight with emotion.

He nodded, kissing my lips again and again.

“I’ll always bring you back.”

OceanofPDF.com

84



Ryan Fairview

After Cal fucked me senseless, I decided to change the sheets and run a load of laundry.

I told Cal I would meet him downstairs, but even though I had done my best to soothe Cal's mind, he was still clearly feeling lost.

I had to keep reminding myself that Damian had been the closest thing Cal had ever had to a parent, and killing him was definitely taking a toll on his mental health.

Not that he would ever admit that. But it was clear in the underlying current of sadness that he tried to cover up with his usual boyish charm.

Between my broken dark angel and getting Fairview back up and running, I had my work cut out for me... but I felt optimistic.

Thinking of the way Cal's hard, warm body felt pressed up against me and the insane amount of pleasure he'd stroked from my core, I couldn't help but smile.

I had no idea sex could be like that. The few times I had sex in college, it'd been clumsy and not something I particularly enjoyed.

There was a time with one girl where I was having a really hard time staying hard, and she said something about it that I think she meant to be kind but was just fucking humiliating.

'It's ok, it happens to everyone!'

Like I had erectile dysfunction or something... It was just easier to avoid sex altogether after that.

It all made sense now. Obviously, it had been difficult to stay hard for her. I was fucking *gay*.

My cheeks didn't even flush at the thought anymore. I was fucking gay, and my boyfriend was the hottest fucking person I had ever seen in my life. And he was *all mine*.

As I loaded the washing machine, my mind wandered to the night before and how it had felt when he pushed deep into me for the first time.

The intense burn that had given way to the most amazing feelings of pleasure. I had *never* felt like that in my entire fucking life. How could something that felt so good be wrong?

It couldn't be. We were meant to fucking be together. I knew that now.

The way he had looked at me when he told me he loved me. The fear in his eyes when he thought I wouldn't say it back... It made my heart both swell and break at the same time.

How could he think I wouldn't love him back?

Cal was *everything* to me.

He was fucking incredible. He was so strong for surviving what he had, and for the first time in my life, I understood what all those musicians seemed to go on about in love songs.

When I looked at Cal, my whole body tingled, and I always seemed to feel lightheaded. I had never really been a touchy person before, but now, I constantly craved his hands on me.

He *always* seemed to be on my mind, even when he shouldn't be, and I honestly didn't care to try to change that.

My goal had always been to keep Fairview up and running to honor the memory of my father. But now, I had a new goal, and that was to keep that gorgeous smile on my man's face and that darkness out of his eyes.

When I entered the kitchen, I smiled when I found what I was affectionately calling my 'band of misfits' up to their usual antics. Cassandra and Theo were bickering... or, I think Cass was bickering, and Theo was flirting in her strange Theo way.

Cass was working away on her laptop while sipping a smoothie, and Theo kept trying to read what she was doing over her shoulder, which seemed to be driving Cal's sister insane.

I didn't miss how unnecessarily close Theo kept pressing in next to Cassandra's ear, her dark eyes sparkling with amusement every time Cass scoffed or complained about her 'personal space.' However, she never physically pushed Theo away or changed seats, which I found interesting.

Naomi was sitting in front of a stack of college brochures and animatedly telling my mother about all of her options while Vox subtly watched her over the top of his own laptop. While Iris was smiling in her dreamy way as Naomi yammered on about majors and arts degrees, Vox was watching her like he wanted to snatch the brochures right out of her hands and send her to her room.

I frowned, unsure where all the intensity was coming from, when Cal appeared, pressing a warm cup of coffee into my hands.

"Here you go, baby." He smiled, brushing a soft kiss over the corner of my mouth. I glanced up at him and smiled.

"Thanks, angel." I took a sip of the hot, delicious coffee. "Are you on breakfast duty today?" I asked, glancing at the disaster area that had '*Chef Cal*' written all over it.

He beamed at me. "Yup. Making your favorite."

My stomach growled, and my mouth watered despite the fact that the mess on the counter was making my eye twitch.

"Omelettes?"

"Yeah. Spinach and mushroom. I also asked Iris to pick up that Swiss cheese you're obsessed with."

My cheeks flushed, and my heart did that little pitter-patter thing that it only ever seemed to do for Cal. No one ever made me their number one priority like he did. He always seemed to be thinking of me and doing small things for me that he thought I might like. It was fucking adorable.

"Thank you," I murmured, pressing another soft kiss to his lips. "Though I miss the Obituary apron."

He barked out a laugh and shook his head. "Noted." He smirked before gently slipping his hand around the small of my back and leaning in to whisper in my ear.

"How are you feeling? Are you okay?" he asked, and my already flushed face turned an even deeper shade of red.

“Uhm, yeah,” I choked. He pulled back and grinned at me, rubbing a thumb over one of my red-hot cheeks. “A little sore, but I’m okay.”

“Good,” he said, dropping one more kiss on my head before heading back to his messy omelet station.

I took a seat at the kitchen table, and Theo slid down into the chair next to Cass, turning her dark gaze on me.

“Dracula mimed earlier that the douchebag is dead. That true?” she asked with a cavalier grin.

“Fuck yeah, it is! Blew his bitch ass up,” Cal chirped from the stove as he flipped an omelet.

“Bad ass.” Theo grinned, sprawling out in her chair and draping her arm around the back of Cassandra’s seat.

Cass looked up from her work and scowled at Theo, her brown eyes looking pointedly at where my sister had rested her arm, then back again.

Theo just gave her a mischievous grin and raised an eyebrow.

“Don’t encourage him, Theodora,” Cass snapped, and Theo chuckled.

“Oh-ho. Full naming me? Nobody calls me that, princess.”

“Why not? It’s your name, *Theodora*,” she snapped back, and Theo’s grin just widened.

“Mmm. Wasn’t complaining. I like it when you say it like that, princess. Though it would sound better if you were screaming it.”

“Jesus Christ, Theo!” I barked, gesturing to Naomi, who was watching their interaction like she wished she had popcorn.

“What? I’m not a child. I’m nineteen and read more kinky shit than you can probably even dream up, Ry-guy. Don’t censor the flirting on my account.”

“We are *not* flirting!” Cass hissed, and Theo laughed again.

“Speak for yourself, princess.”

I looked at Vox, whose eyes narrowed on Naomi at her implication that she was not as innocent as we all had pretended she was.

Fuck, when did this place turn into such a madhouse?

“Well, if the threat is gone, then can I *please* go back to my condo?” Cass asked, and my heart skipped a beat.

I hadn’t thought about what would happen now that Damian was dead. Of course, everyone would leave Fairview and go back to their respective places.

Well, except for Vox. I didn't know where he was going to stay. As far as I knew, he lived at Apex.

Theo didn't look happy about the idea of Cass leaving either.

I glanced over at Cal, whose mind seemed to have gone down the same path as mine.

Was he going to go back to the townhouse?

"I guess," Callum muttered, and Cass let out an uncharacteristic squealing sound that made Theo's expression turn murderous.

"Fucking *amazing!* I'm so sick of living out of a suitcase."

"You have a closet in your room; you could have unpacked," Theo snapped, and Cass rolled her eyes.

"You call that cubby hole a *closet*? There's not even room for *half* of my shoes, and the lighting is terrible."

"There is no lighting. It's a fucking closet."

"*Exactly.*"

"Okay, enough!" I snapped, and they both looked at me with completely contrasting expressions.

"I want to make it clear that no one *has* to leave." I glanced over at Vox, who raised an eyebrow at me in question.

"I know you lived at Apex, Vox. So if you want to stay here while you find a place, please stay as long as you want."

"And you two," I turned to Naomi and Cal, "same goes for you. I know Damian owned that townhouse, so if you don't want to move back there, you can stay here. Though, I understand if you're homesick."

Naomi wrinkled her nose.

"Nah. Fuck that place. I don't want to live somewhere that has anything to do with that asshole. Not after what he did to Cal."

I beamed, the anxiety that had been building in my chest at the thought of Cal moving out quickly disappearing.

"Besides, I'll be heading off to school soon anyway, so I won't be in your hair for long!"

Feeling giddy that Naomi was on board, I glanced at Cal, who was plating my omelet with a frown on his face.

"Cal?" I asked, confused as to why he seemed upset. He stalked over to me and dropped the plate in front of me, shrugging.

"Sure."

The anxiety was back.

What the fuck? Did he not want to stay here?

He wanted to go back to the townhouse?

“Hey, what’s wrong?” I asked, but he avoided my gaze.

“Nothing.”

That felt like a lie. I watched him head back to start cleaning up the shitstorm he had left in his wake while making me my breakfast, suddenly not feeling hungry anymore.

Looking around the table, Cal wasn’t the only one who seemed to be upset. Vox and Theo both had equally sour expressions on their faces.

Forcing myself to take a bite of my omelet, I wondered what the hell it was I was missing.

I bit my lip while watching Cal clean a frying pan more aggressively than necessary.

What was I supposed to do?

I’d asked him what was wrong, and he said nothing... but clearly something was wrong...

Did I ask again?

Or give him space?

Fuck.

This relationship thing was *hard*.

OceanofPDF.com

85



Cal Walker

Ryan took over doing the dishes, which was fucking annoying. I told him I had it under control, but he winced and wrung his hands together, mumbling about how he would *'prefer to do them.'*

Guess I couldn't even fucking do the dishes right.

"Fine," I snapped, ripping the dish towel off my shoulder and tossing it on the counter. I turned to leave when Ryan wrapped a hand around my bicep to stop me.

No matter how fucked up I was feeling, I couldn't bring myself to pull away from him. This man had a fucking chokehold on me.

"What?" I asked, a little more curtly than I intended.

He was looking up at me with that adorably innocent little frown he sometimes got when he was anxious.

"Are you sure everything is ok?"

No.

Nothing was ok, but I couldn't tell him that. He already thought I was some sort of pathetic invalid who needed care.

I was supposed to be taking care of him.

Not the other way around.

I forced myself to soften so he wouldn't worry about me any more than he already was.

"I'm fine, baby," I said, dropping a gentle kiss on his lips. "I'm just going to, uh, go clean my gun."

He nodded, accepting the lie, before turning back to the mess I had left him.

I watched him slip into '*Ryan mode*' and bit back a smile. I loved how he looked at messes like they were tiny battle scenes that needed to be conquered.

My smile slipped away, however, when I remembered that he didn't even think I was capable of washing a few fucking dishes.

Biting back a growl, I stalked out of the kitchen and headed up to our bedroom.

Well, I guess his bedroom now.

There was no way I was staying here like some sort of fucking charity case. I would get my own spot so he didn't feel like he needed to support me out of some misguided sense of obligation.

It suddenly occurred to me that I had no idea how much of my funds had gone into eliminating Damian's hits on my sisters.

Did I even have enough left to buy a house?

Worse came to worse, I could sell the g wagon. That would get me a few hundred grand...

But then what?

What the fuck was I going to do for money now?

Get a... job?

An unwelcome vision of me flipping burgers at the local McDicks floated across my vision, and I felt the blood drain from my face.

Not that I thought there was anything wrong with that. If that's what I had to do to make money and support Naomi, I would fucking do it.

But what would Ryan think?

He was an established business owner, and I was an uneducated, broke ex-mercenary working a minimum wage job?

Would that be a turn-off?

I let out a growl, rubbing my hand down my face in frustration when I heard the door open. On reflex, I ripped my gun out of my waistband and

pointed it at the intruder, only to immediately relax when I realized it was just Cassandra.

I rolled my eyes.

“What are you doing here, Cass? I thought you would be deep cleaning your condo by now.”

She snorted. “You think *I* clean the condo? I obviously hire out.”

I smirked. “Ah, yes. I forgot you don’t like rubber gloves.”

She flipped her glossy hair over her shoulder and wandered over to the desk by the window, running her perfectly manicured fingers over the antique wood appreciatively.

“They make your hands all sweaty. It’s bad for the nail beds.”

“Right.”

“Anyway. I didn’t come up here to talk about good nail hygiene.”

“Then why did you come up here?”

“I came up here to find out why you’re pouting like a little whiny baby.”

“Jesus Christ, Cass. You’re the worst.” I sighed, flopping down on Ryan’s bed. She leaned against the desk, crossing her arms over her stomach.

Even just sitting in the house all day, Cassandra looked incredibly put together. Her cream silk blouse was tailored and looked like pure luxury. She had it stylishly tucked into a high-waisted skirt, and her toned legs were crossed before her. Her bare but perfectly manicured feet looked ready to slip into some strappy designer sandals at any moment.

We had completely different styles, but as annoying as she sometimes was, she was one of the few people on this planet who really *got* me.

Naomi was too young to remember the basement, but Cassandra and I had lived through that together. There was a time when we were all the other had, and we had clung to each other in the dark.

We both knew what it was to claw your way out of a desperate situation with your bare fucking hands, and we both had the scars to prove it.

Cassandra ran her hand through her thick, dark hair, and the sleeve of her blouse rode up her arm, exposing the skeleton key she had tattooed on her wrist.

It was the twin of the key I had tattooed on my chest. We had gotten them done together so we would never forget who we were fighting for.

“Spill it, little brother. I don’t have all day,” she snipped, and I sighed, knowing there was no way I was getting out of this.

“I feel like a loser. I don’t have a job, and Ryan basically just told me I could stay here out of fucking pity. It’s not hot.”

Cassandra raised a razor-sharp brow and gave me an irritated look.

“So? Get a job.”

“With what skills?” I snapped. “I’m not really interested in perfecting the phrase ‘*do you want fucking fries with that.*’”

She rolled her eyes. “First of all, I don’t think you’re supposed to curse at the customers.”

“*Cassandraaaaa*,” I whined. “This is serious. I can’t have my man taking care of me like this. I would rather die.”

“Shut the fuck up, Cal. Stop being a pussy,” she snapped, clearly annoyed that I would even joke about taking my own life. She stalked toward me, her brown eyes burning with that same passion she had so many years ago when we had stood at the top of the stairs together. Ready to go to war for our sister.

“Know what I’m hearing? A bunch of *excuses*. When I decided I wanted to be a lawyer, do you think I sat around and bitched and whined that I was so much farther behind the other kids?”

I pursed my lips but shook my head.

“No.”

“That’s right. I fucking put in the *work*,” she said, reaching forward and brushing my hair off my forehead. It was a sweet, sisterly touch and directly contrasted with the intense look on her face.

“You know just as well as I do that no one in this life is going to hand us shit, Callum. If you want something, you’re going to have to do whatever is necessary to take it for your damn self.”

I swallowed. She was right.

“So... what is it that you want?”

I thought about it for a second.

Ryan. I wanted fucking Ryan. I wanted to make all his goddamn dreams come true. I wanted to be there for him. I wanted him to lean on *me*. Rely on *me*. I wanted him to not be able to imagine his life without me in it... so how did I do that?

Suddenly. It hit me, and I felt like such a fucking idiot that it took my bitchy ass sister to force me to get there.

A slow smile spread across my face, and my eyes locked on Cassandra’s.

“Can you help me shop for a suit?” I asked, and her blood-red lips curled at the corners, her eyes shining.

“Now you’re speaking my language.”

OceanofPDF.com

86



Ryan Fairview

Getting Fairview back up and running was somehow both stressful and a huge relief all at once. There was a ton of stuff that needed to get done, but it felt nice to actually be *doing* it.

To make things even better, Cal's strange mood had significantly softened after he finished cleaning his gun, and he more or less stayed out of my way on the days I was busy getting everything ready.

He seemed to be spending a lot of time with Theo, which surprised me. I couldn't determine whether it was a good thing or not.

Without Cass around for Theo to pester, my sister seemed more than happy to spend time with Cal, which saved me from having to keep him entertained when I was in the throes of my neuroses.

However, the two of them together just *reeked* of trouble. After a few days of watching them creep around Fairview together, they seemed to have developed some secret language that only the two of them understood.

One time, at dinner, Theo made a snarky comment, and Cal high-fived her without even making eye contact. Even their *smirks* were starting to

look similar.

It was concerning.

However, I didn't have much time to worry about them when I needed to get announcements of our grand re-opening on my website and Facebook page, newsletters out to all of my long-term care partners, and the prep room restocked and cleaned.

As exhausting as it all was, nighttime always felt like a reward.

Having dinner with Cal sitting next to me, joking and laughing with Theo, Naomi, and my Mom, felt like a fucking dream. I often pinched myself under the table to make sure it really was real and he was truly here, alive, healthy, and *happy*.

Every night, he wrapped me up in his arms after dinner, leaving soft kisses up the side of my neck on the way to our room.

Then he stripped off both of our clothes and showed me everything I had been missing for all the years I went without him.

Every night was a new experience. Sometimes, he took his time worshiping me, making me come so fucking hard I saw stars. Other times, he forced me to worship *him*, and if I was being honest, those times were my favorite.

After spending the whole day being the boss and having everything fall on my shoulders, having Cal take charge and tell me *exactly* what he expected of me and what he wanted me to do was the best sort of break for my anxious mind.

He had started producing toys and props that I'd only heard about in passing or seen in movies. Never in my life did I think I would find myself in a situation where my partner had me strapped down to the bed, paddling my ass raw while whispering the sweetest words of praise to me each time I took a hit well.

Through Cal, I learned that I liked pain. I craved a certain roughness and dominance that I don't think I would have ever uncovered within myself on my own.

I knew Cal was a sadist, and he needed to hurt people to fulfill a dark craving deep inside him that I didn't understand. It was like he was angry at the world and needed to take it out on someone.

It felt like fate that I was not only *willing* to allow him to take it out on me...but *wanted* him to.

He told me he was worried he would take it too far, and he checked in with me often, making sure that the pain he was inflicting was truly something I wanted.

But it was, and I trusted him. I knew he would never truly hurt me, not in the way he was worried he would.

Which is why I started pushing him to face his fear of the bathtub with me. Also, his continued aversion to dubstep broke my fucking heart.

He told me what Damian had done to him. I knew that he had been tortured in that fucking bathtub for days, and that evil man had made him listen to all his favorite songs while he hurt him.

I wanted to help Cal overcome that trauma by reclaiming it. He kept telling me it was too dangerous. And maybe it was. Maybe I was being naive and stupid. I knew we should probably talk to a professional before attempting anything crazy... Like playing dubstep while letting Cal dominate me in the bathtub.

Cal was still seeing his therapist, but he refused to even broach the idea with her, telling me there was no fucking way in a million years he would risk something like that.

But... I couldn't stand the way he skirted the bathtub every time he entered the ensuite, eyeing the large black stone basin with pain in his eyes.

I hated it even more when we were in the car together, and he put on the radio instead of the horrible music that I knew once brought him so much joy.

I couldn't live each day watching something so common and mundane put that look on his face. So, despite his warnings and his wishes, on the night before Fairview's grand re-opening, I brought up the tray I used for my embalming equipment and set it up next to the large, black, modern bathtub in our ensuite.

On the tray, I arranged several of the toys and tools he had been using on me in the bedroom, as well as the police-grade handcuffs he used to tie me to the bed. Remembering the time he had joked with me, asking if I had a blood kink, I also thought to include some fresh scalpels, still in their single-use, disposable packaging.

Then finally, I set up a small Bluetooth speaker and waited for him to come up to bed.

87



Ryan Fairview

‘Play Massive Attack, Paradise Circus (Zeds Dead Remix)’ [YouTube version](#)

“Ginger snap?”

My heart was pounding in my chest when I heard Cal enter our bedroom. I was leaning against the tub, suddenly feeling like this was the stupidest idea I’d ever had, when he popped his head in.

I watched his giant smile slip off his face as his brown eyes darted around the bathroom, taking in the set I had created for us.

His gaze fell to the surgical table, then the speaker, then darted back up to my face.

“What the fuck is all this?” he growled, taking an angry step forward. I watched his pupils blow, and his skin turned to gooseflesh before my very eyes. I swallowed.

All the hair on the back of my neck stood at attention, and a wave of fear shot through me. My baser instincts told me that the man standing before me was no longer the Cal I knew but something darker. More dangerous.

My cock throbbed in response to the fear coursing through my body, and I let out a shaky breath, doing my best to remember that this wouldn't work if I folded the second he showed signs of distress. I needed to be strong. *Firm.*

"I want you to fuck me in the tub," I said calmly. "And I want you to choose a dubstep playlist to put on while we...play."

Cal's Adam's apple bobbed, and his fists clenched at his sides. I had never seen him so tense. His gaze kept darting to the tub, the table, and back to me again.

"Ryan. We talked about this." His voice was rough and strained. I couldn't tell if he was angry, afraid, or turned on. Maybe all of the above.

"This is something I want to do," I replied, and he snarled. *Literally* snarled like a rabid animal.

I blinked, and he was in front of me, his hand curled in the front of my T-shirt.

"You want me to fucking hurt you? Ryan, you have *no* idea what the fuck you're doing. This isn't a fucking game."

He was shaking. Again, I couldn't tell if it was from anger or fear, but I couldn't back down now.

"I know it's not a game, angel. *Play* was a poor choice of words. But yes. I want you to hurt me. I want you to do whatever you need to do to me to reclaim the pieces of yourself that he stole from you."

I reached up and cupped his face, meeting his dark eyes. "Next time you look at this tub, I don't want you to think of Damian and what he did to you. I want you to think of me and how you felt taking control of me."

I slipped my hand around him and slid his phone out of his back pocket, holding it up between us. "Next time you listen to your music, I don't want you to think of him; I want you to think of *me*. I want to create new memories. *Better* memories. Of us, *together*."

He growled and released my shirt, jerking away.

I reached for the speaker and paired it to his phone, handing the phone back to him. He hesitated, but I knew I was getting through to him.

His gaze fell down to the table again, and he tugged at his lip ring with his teeth as he cataloged all the things I set up for him. I didn't miss the way his eyes lingered on the scalpels, and my dick throbbed in anticipation.

"What if I can't stop?" he whispered, snapping his eyes back to meet mine. "What if I black out?" He reached out and brushed his fingers against my throat instead of taking the phone. "What if I take it too far?"

"You won't, Callum," I said, my voice just as quiet as his. "You're not him. You love me, and I love *you*. Let me do this for you."

He stared at me for a long, heavy moment before snatching the phone out of my hands.

"Your safe word is red. Say it," he growled, and I nodded, doing my best not to react to the thrill of exhilaration that coursed through me.

"My safe word is red," I agreed, and he nodded tersely.

Cal put on a song that was much slower and different from what I was used to him playing, but soon, the quavering bass that was a staple in the dubstep genre began, and his already blown pupils grew even wider.

He literally shuddered before me, and I watched as the last part of his humanity melted away, and I was looking into the eyes of the monster that Damian had created.



"STRIP," CAL ORDERED.

There wasn't any warmth in his tone, and the comforting brown of his irises had been completely overtaken by the endless black of his pupils.

My hands shook as I rushed to do what he said. He stood completely still as he watched me get undressed. It was almost eerie as if he were a predator waiting for the perfect moment to descend on his prey.

When I was out of my clothes and standing completely nude before him, he nodded.

"Get in the tub, Mr. Fairview."

I frowned. He had never called me that before, and I didn't like it. It felt foreign and detached. Like I wasn't a person to him anymore.

"Do I need to repeat myself?" he growled, and I forced down my discomfort. I had asked for this, and I wasn't going to back out now.

Ignoring the slight tremble in my legs, I climbed into the tub and leaned back against the side with no faucet.

Cal approached the tub, and he loomed over me for a moment, his dark eyes sliding down my naked, prone body.

He licked his lips, then snatched up the scalpel he had been eyeing.

He perched on the edge of the tub, still staring at me with those terrifyingly dead eyes. The quavering bass of the dubstep rolled around us, and he slowly peeled the plastic off the instrument.

Cal twisted slightly so he could allow his eyes to wander over my body again, and they fell on my dick, which was embarrassingly soft.

“Why aren’t you hard?” he asked, glancing up at me again. “I expect you to stay hard for me for the duration of this process, Mr. Fairview.”

Despite my absolute *hatred* for the way he kept calling me by my last name, the dominance in his tone had my cock immediately thickening in response to his order. He watched my dick grow hard, and I expected a smirk or a smile, but he gave me nothing.

“Good” was all he said, spinning the scalpel between his fingers.

“Give me your arm.”

Glancing at the scalpel nervously, I swallowed but complied. I put my hand in his lap, and he wrapped his fingers around my wrist, firmly pulling my arm straight across his knee.

He gently stroked the soft, sensitive skin on the inside of my bicep, running his tongue over his bottom lip as he did so.

His touch made me squirm slightly. It was sensitive and ticklish when he stroked it with the pads of his fingers. My cock throbbed as he teased the area, and I let out a shuddering breath.

“I’m going to cut you, and you will thank me while I do it. Is that understood?” he asked, tightening his grip on my wrist and forcing my arm straighter.

“Yes, angel.”

His eyes darted to meet mine, and his eyebrows rose in surprise. His monster flickered out of focus, and for a split second, my Cal was back. It was only for a moment, then the darkness swallowed him whole.

“You will call me *master* while you are in this tub, Mr. Fairview.”

I frowned but forced myself to nod. This was about him and his needs. If he needed me to call him master to reclaim this moment, I would do it.

“Yes, master.”

“Good boy.”

He returned his attention to my arm and positioned the tip of the scalpel against the inside of my bicep.

The first slice sent a confusing mix of pain and ecstasy shooting through my body. My cock surged between my legs, but I was unable to stop the whimper of pain that escaped my lips as hot blood spilled down my arm.

I expected him to pause at the sound, but he just continued to cut me. I writhed in the tub, caught up in a complicated mix of feelings and emotions.

“What do we say, Mr. Fairview?” Cal asked, his tone dry and bored as he carved another line into my flesh.

“Thank you!” I whimpered, fisting my free hand at my side against the pain.

“Thank you, what?” he drawled, slicing another deep line into my skin. My crimson blood was bright against the flesh of my arm but seemed to disappear as it slid down the black basin of the tub.

“Thank you, master!” I sobbed.

“Good boy,” he murmured. I flinched and waited for another cut, but he seemed to be finished. He was staring at my eviscerated flesh with that dead, blank look on his face, and I wished so badly I could hear what he was thinking.

I peeked at the ruined flesh of my arm, and my eyes widened. He hadn’t been just carving random slices into me.

He had carved his *name*.

A crude and bloody ‘*Callum*’ had been cut into the flesh of my arm, and my cock throbbed between my legs at the sight of it.

Why was that so fucking hot?

“Thank you, master,” I whispered again, this time meaning it. Something about having his name permanently carved on my body felt so bone-achingly *right* I couldn’t put it into words.

He looked up from his bloody masterpiece, and again, the darkness in his eyes seemed to flicker in and out of focus for a moment.

He lifted my wrist and leaned down over my arm. I gasped as he ran his hot tongue over the raw cuts, lapping up my blood like it was some sort of sweet, liquid dessert. He closed his eyes and shuddered as he laved his tongue over my wounds before dropping bloody kisses up and down my arm.

“Mmmm. You taste so good. Look at all this gorgeous blood,” he purred. I whimpered, and he leaned back, dropping the scalpel back on the table.

He stood up and looked down at me, cocking his head to the side. I felt exposed, lying in the tub naked and bleeding before him while he was still fully clothed.

His gaze fell on my hard, throbbing dick, and he reached for it, wrapping his hand around my thick shaft. I groaned as he leisurely pumped it a few times.

“You like it when I hurt you, don’t you?”

I whined as he ran his thumb over my crown, and he growled.

“Tell me that you like it, Mr. Fairview.”

“I do. I like it. Hurt me, Cal, *please*.”

His eyes flashed, and I realized my mistake. I had forgotten to call him master and used his name.

He released my cock and wrapped his hand around my throat instead, squeezing hard enough that it hurt.

“Try that again.”

“I’m sorry. Master. *Please*. Hurt me,” I begged, and he glowered at me, his eyes so dark and cold that I shuddered.

It was like looking into the eyes of a stranger. He was so detached and angry that I wondered if my plan was actually hurting him more than helping him.

“You will need to be punished for that, Mr. Fairview,” he growled before releasing my throat. Without another word, he snatched up one of the pairs of handcuffs I had left for him on the table.

88



Cal Walker

Darkness was consuming my vision.
I knew this was a bad idea.

This was *dangerous*. I kept finding myself losing time. I would black out, then suddenly snap back to the bathroom with the blaring bass of Zed's Dead rattling my bones as I tore into the man I loved.

I barely remembered carving my name into his arm. For a moment, I had been trapped in that concrete room again, chained to a much rustier tub, while Damian burned up *my* flesh.

Sometimes, I was in the tub, looking up. But most of the time, *I* was Damian, looking down.

My mind was spinning, and I kept forgetting that Ryan was the person before me. When I looked at him, all I saw was me.

It wasn't until he called me 'angel' that I was able to snap out of it and remember that I was free now. *I was in control*.

The moment hadn't lasted. The monster inside me didn't like the way Ryan had been able to dismantle the illusion with a single word, so I told

him to call me master instead.

He was hard and leaking for me, but there was hesitancy in his eyes as if he knew this was different from all the other times I had hurt him.

Ryan enjoyed pain during sex, but it had always been surface-level between us. I had never cut him before, and the sight of all his delicious, red blood flowing down his arm both delighted and disturbed me.

I found myself wishing I could remember cutting him, but I was hesitant to pick up the scalpel again.

Snatching up one of the pairs of handcuffs, I ordered him to lift his right leg. He did so tentatively, and I fastened one cuff around his ankle before forcing his leg straight and back.

“Give me your arm,” I demanded again.

He complied, and I attached his right wrist to the other end of the cuff. I repeated this on his other side, so he was forced to lie in the tub completely spread open and at my mercy.

I could tell he was terrified but still turned on. His cock was *so hard*, and it kept surging between his legs and leaving me beautiful little puddles of cum on his abdomen.

I stalked around the tub, admiring my work, before moving on to the next stage of my plan. The monster in me was snarling to be let loose, and I was doing everything I could to keep it under control. But I was slipping.

Turning the tap to the tub on, I reached for the handheld shower attachment that was fastened to the side.

I flipped the latch that redirected the water to the handheld, and Ryan squirmed.

“What are you doing?” he rasped, and I ran my fingers through the stream, observing the different settings I had at my disposal.

It was currently in a gentle rain setting, and I flashed the water over the backs of his legs, causing him to jump.

I ran the gentle trickle of water over his cock, and he groaned, rocking his hips as much as he could while I had him trussed up like this.

“Does that feel good?” I asked, continuing to tickle him with the water.

“Yes, yes, it feels good.” He moaned as I teased him, moving the spray over his legs and then back to his cock, where he seemed to be craving it most.

“You’re not supposed to be enjoying this, Mr. Fairview,” I warned.

'Turn up the pressure,' my monster whispered, and my fingers hovered over the switch.

A flashback of McGreggor dragging the hose over my exposed cock pulled me down.

I was screaming, and Damian was *laughing*.

Everything was cold, wet and dark.

I was alone.

No one was coming to save me.

I blinked, and I was back at Fairview. I found myself blasting the shit out of Ryan with the jet setting the same way McGreggor had done to me.

The water pressure here, thankfully, wasn't nearly as strong as it was in the basement of Apex, but it was powerful enough that I knew it hurt.

The way he cringed and moaned in agony made my blood hot, and my dick swelled in my jeans.

"This is what you wanted, isn't it, Mr. Fairview?" I heard my voice, but it didn't feel like I was the one saying the words.

I dragged the stream over his balls and felt myself smirk as he cried out in pain.

"Tell me this is what you want," I ordered, unbuttoning my pants as I continued to torture him with the faucet.

"Yes. It's what I want," he rambled as I cut the water up and down the backs of his thighs.

"Keep that cock hard, Ryan. If you let it get soft, there'll be hell to pay," I warned, though there didn't seem to be any risk of that. His balls were swollen and taught, drawn up tight against him. His little pink asshole was exposed, and I suddenly wanted to ram myself into it.

Turning off the water, I hung the fixture back up next to the tub's faucet and pulled off my pants.

Ryan was moaning and rocking slightly in the tub, his hard cock pointing directly at his face.

I snatched up a fresh scalpel and stepped into the tub with him. It was large enough that I could comfortably kneel by his ass. I ran my hand down the back of his thigh and growled as I ripped the fresh blade out of its wrapper.

"If you've had enough, tell me now." I snarled, but he shook his head frantically.

"No. More. I want more."

I narrowed my eyes at him as the dubstep blared around us.

Almost feeling angry with him for *wanting* me to hurt him, I carved a deep line in the back of his thigh, my own cock leaking at the sight of his blood welling through the cut.

He screamed in pain, but I couldn't bring myself to stop. I carved another line, snarling.

"Is this what you fucking wanted, Ryan? You want me to fucking torture you? Cut you up like the worthless piece of shit you are?"

'Who could ever love you, Callum?'

'Demon boy!'

'You're nothing. You don't deserve to be loved.'

I blinked and realized I had carved another word in Ryan's thigh.

A bloody and crude '*mine*' was staring up at me, and I turned to look at Ryan's face. He was looking at me with so much hurt and pain in his eyes, and not from the cuts on his flesh.

From what I had said.

"Say red," I snapped. But he shook his head.

I tossed the bloody scalpel across the room and grabbed his jaw, hovering over him. A confusing mix of devastation, rage, and heat rolled through me as my cock slid against his ass.

"Say red!" I bellowed, but he refused, giving me a sad smile.

"I love you, angel," he whispered, and the entire world stopped spinning.

89



Cal Walker

I don't remember uncuffing him, but I blinked again, and we were lying in the bottom of the tub. He was holding me tightly against him as I shook in his arms. My face was buried in the side of his neck, and I was crying.

"Shh, I've got you, angel. You're alright," he whispered, stroking his fingers through my hair as I fell apart. "You're so brave, baby. I love you so much. I'm so proud of you," he cooed.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." I was babbling as he stroked me, but he shook his head.

"You have nothing to be sorry for. I consented to everything you did, Callum. You're safe. I'm ok, and you're safe," he promised, and I shuddered against him, shocked at how much his words comforted me.

He dropped a kiss on my forehead and brushed away the tears on my cheek with his thumb. I looked up at him and found him smiling down at me, his brandy eyes warm and full of a gentle kind of love.

No one had ever looked at me like that before, and it made my heart ache.

“Kiss me,” I found myself ordering, and he complied as he always did when I asked something of him. He leaned down to catch my lips in his, and I groaned as his familiar taste flooded my mouth.

“I need you,” I groaned, and he whimpered as I sucked his tongue into my mouth.

Without breaking away from the kiss, I reached for the table and felt around for the lube Ryan had included before fumbling to get the cap off.

“*IneedyouIneedyouIneedyou*,” I chanted against him, squirting the lube between us, barely caring where it ended up.

Swiping through the slippery substance with my fingers, I hastily reached between Ryan’s legs, smearing it over his crack. Quickly, I coated my dick with some too.

He spread his legs wider for me, arching to give me access as I notched the head of my cock against his hole.

I was too desperate to be inside him to prep him properly, and he grunted as I pushed past the tight barrier of his ass and sank all the way in.

His scorching hot channel enveloped me, and my broken mind went blank for a long, blissful moment.

Home. I was home. I was safe.

“I love you, Callum. I’ll always love you,” Ryan whispered in my ear, and his words rushed through me, causing me to move.

I ground into him, slowly dragging my cock in and out, relishing in the breathy pants he was beginning to release as I fucked into him.

“Ryan...” I groaned, curling one arm around his neck so I could hold him against me while reaching between us to fist his cock in my other hand.

“I love you, baby; I’m so sorry I hurt you,” I whispered as I slowly made love to the only man that had ever made me feel safe.

“You hurt me so good, baby. Never stop hurting me.” He nipped my ear, and I relished in the quivering moan he released as I twisted his dick gently in my hand.

“Fuck, Ryan. You’re everything to me. Do you understand? You’re *everything*.”

“I know, baby, I know.” He panted, and I fucked him harder. The sound of flesh pounding into flesh competed with the mellow dubstep that was still playing, and I realized that his plan had worked.

The next time I heard this song, I wouldn’t be thinking of Damian. I would be thinking of this moment and how good it felt to slide in and out of

the man I loved more than anything I had ever loved before.

“Fuck... Cal, I’m gonna... I’m gonna...”

“You gonna come for me, baby?” I whispered, sliding my hand up and down his shaft. “Show me. Show me how much you love me.”

“Fuckfuckfuckfuck. Baby, I’m *coming*. I’m *coming for you...*” He gasped, and I followed him over the edge just as his cock began to throb in my hand.

Ryan’s hot cum spurt between us as I filled his ass up with my own release. I pumped into him through the duration of my orgasm before collapsing on top of him and showering him with kisses.

“Thank you,” I whispered, dropping several kisses over his mouth and his cheeks.

He cupped my face in his hands and kissed me back.

“No need to thank me, angel. I’ll always be what you need me to be. We’re in this together.”

I nodded, feeling myself smile. I brushed a thumb over his cheek and rubbed the tip of my nose against his.

“Together,” I agreed, and he nodded.

“Forever,” he breathed, and my eyes pricked with tears.

“Forever.”

90



Ryan Fairview

Alexa, play: I Wanna Dance With Somebody - Sleep Token

I was going to have a fucking panic attack.

Everything was *perfect*, which meant I was missing something. I just *knew that* as soon as I let the first patrons in, I would realize I had forgotten something stupid. Like the hearse would need gas or something...

Holy fuck, I didn't fill the hearse up with gas!

I rushed out of my office, snatching up the keys on my way to the garage. Theo was lounging on the steps that led up to her apartment above the garage, smoking a joint.

She took one look at my obviously anxious face and smirked.

"What are you freaking out about *now*?"

"I'm such a fucking idiot, I forgot to fill up!" I cried, jamming my finger into the garage door opener. People were going to start arriving at

any moment, but if I hurried, I might be able to get to the station down the street and back in time.

“Relax, Ryan. Your boyfriend took care of that yesterday.”

I was already in the front seat, ramming the keys into the ignition as Theo’s words registered.

Wait... what?

Sure enough, the needle on the gas dial flipped to point at ‘full’ as the engine rumbled to life, and a rushing sense of relief rolled through me.

Thank fuck Cal did that... How did he even know to do that?

The cuts that carved out his name on the inside of my bicep throbbed as my chest swelled with warmth.

This fucking man... he surprised me every day. I didn’t think it was possible to love someone as much as I loved him.

After holding each other and kissing for a long time in the tub the night before, Cal had carefully disinfected the wounds he had inflicted and bandaged me up.

The marks were covered easily by a T-shirt or shorts and even more easily by my shirt and suit jacket.

As much as I knew that the trauma he had sustained would likely take an entire lifetime to overcome, last night had been a step in the right direction.

He hadn’t skirted the tub this morning like he normally did. And when I put on his playlist while we brushed our teeth, a small smile ghosted across his lips.

And now, I was sitting in a fueled-up hearse moments before my big reopening because Cal had the foresight to take care of me in ways no one really had before.

We were fucking made for each other.

Smiling to myself, I cut the engine and hurried back toward the house, pausing briefly as Theo called my name again.

“Speaking of the psycho, he said he needed your help with something upstairs. You should probably check on him before the service starts.”

The relief I had felt just moments before evaporated, and my anxiety returned.

What could he possibly need help with!?

Was he okay?

It wasn’t like him to ask for help with anything... fuck.

Maybe last night was too much for him...

"Thanks," I grunted before shooting toward the house. Suddenly, the service seemed secondary. All I could think of was Cal and how much I hated the pained look he got on his face when his demons came for him.

I took the stairs two at a time, ignoring the sting of the cuts on my thigh as I burst into our bedroom.

"Cal, are you—" The words died on my tongue as my gaze fell on the man himself.

He was standing in the center of our room in a *gorgeous* black suit. My eyes followed the straight lines of his perfectly tailored pants up to his crisp white shirt tucked in under a designer jacket. The jacket pinched in perfectly at his waist, and his broad shoulders cut like blades under the expensive fabric, making my mouth dry up.

He was fumbling with a black tie, his brow furrowed in frustration as he struggled to make a knot.

"Jesus Christ, the dude in the YouTube video made this seem so fucking easy..." he muttered as I gaped at him in shock.

"Angel... you look..." My mouth was so fucking dry I could barely form words, and I shuddered as my dick immediately hardened.

Callum fucking Walker was standing before me in a *suit*, and he looked so good it should be a sin.

He glanced up at me, one of his adorably good-natured grins cocking on his lips.

And... was that... was that a little *blush* that was staining his cheeks?

"Do you like it? Cass helped me pick it out. I've never worn a suit before."

"Do I like it?" I croaked, stepping forward so I could help him with his tie. "Callum, I'm five seconds away from saying fuck this service and begging you to bend me over your knee."

He barked out a laugh and smiled down at me as I got to work on his tie, taking my sweet time slipping the silk tails into a neat, clean knot.

"That good, huh?" He smirked at me, watching my fingers as they deftly tightened the tie under his collar. I swallowed hard and nodded.

"How's that? Too tight?" My voice was raspy and strained, causing his grin to widen.

"No, it's perfect, baby," he purred, leaning forward to ghost his lips over mine.

I closed my eyes and inhaled his scent, relishing in the mint on his breath as it mingled with his musky bergamot cologne.

“What’s this all about?” I whispered, and he brushed a thumb against my jawbone, pulling back to meet my eyes.

“I thought... Well, if you would let me, I thought I could help you with Fairview.”

My heart skipped a beat, and my eyes widened in surprise.

“You want... to help?” I breathed, and his eyes shone. He nodded.

“Yeah. I wasn’t kidding when I said I wanted to help you achieve your dreams, Ryan. If this place is what makes you happy, then I want to be a part of it.”

An overwhelming rush of emotion washed over me so suddenly that the choking sound that escaped my lips surprised me.

My eyes burned as tears welled, and my hand flew to my mouth, a wet laugh babbling out of my mouth.

“*Really?*” I asked, so fucking touched by his words I felt like I needed to pinch myself to make sure this moment was real.

He wrapped his hands around my hips and tugged me into him, dropping a kiss on my forehead.

“Yes, really. I want to be a part of everything you do, Ryan. Like you said, we’re in this together.”

I leaned back and met his eyes, shuddering as he gently brushed one of my tears away with his thumb.

“Forever?”

He nodded, chuckling. “Yes, baby. Forever.”

91



Ryan Fairview

Cal's suit was not the only surprise he had up his sleeve. After the initial shock had worn off, the familiar fingers of anxiety had latched back around my heart.

Cal followed me as I scurried downstairs to double-check that everything was ready. We were at t-minus two minutes before the grieving widow of Mr. Whitlock was due to arrive.

"Shit!" I cried out loud. "I still need to put out the programs!"

Cal chuckled behind me. "I did that already. I was also thinking I could hand some out to people as they arrive."

He flashed me the deck of papers and grinned.

"I also turned the slide show on before I got dressed, so it should already be playing," he informed me, looking rather pleased with himself. My mouth hung open in shock.

Jesus Christ... I was going to marry this man.

"How do you know about all this stuff?" I asked, still struggling to process the fact that Cal not only wanted to help me with my business, but

he was already pretty fucking good at it. He shrugged, shooting me another dazzling grin.

“Theo.”

Suddenly, it all made sense. *This* was why they had been spending so much time together recently. Cal had been trying to learn the ins and outs of the business behind the scenes so he could surprise me.

For *weeks*, he had been planning this... for *me*. Because he fucking loved me and wanted to support something that was so important to me...

I sniffed and pressed my palms into my eyes, suddenly fighting off tears again.

“Fuck... I’m going to be a blubbering mess when they get here,” I choked, though I was laughing.

“If you need a minute, I can handle the guests while you get your overwhelming love for me under control.” He smirked at me, looking more smug than a kitten who had caught its first mouse.

I chuckled and shook my head, cupping his cheek affectionately.

“You say that like it’s a joke, but I *do* love you, Callum. This means... This means the *world* to me.”

He gave me a gentle smile, his warm eyes shining with a tenderness I never thought I would have directed at me.

“You mean the world to *me*, baby,” he said softly, and for the third time that day, I had to force myself not to cry.



MRS. WHITLOCK ARRIVED, AND I MOVED TO GREET HER, BUT CAL leisurely stepped between us, reaching forward to take the grieving woman’s hand.

“Mrs. Whitlock, welcome,” he said, his voice low and comforting. “I’m sorry for your loss.” I eyed the woman, for some reason feeling like I had met her before. Silent Hollow was a mid-sized town, so it was possible I had simply seen her around, but it was more than that.

The tension seemed to immediately melt out of her as Cal squeezed her hand comfortingly, and her eyes shone with tears as she looked up into his warm eyes.

“Thank you,” she whispered, and Cal nodded, his expression appropriately somber.

“Of course. Would you like to see the viewing room?” he asked, and she nodded, her lower lip trembling.

Cal led her away, and Mr. Whitlock’s spirit manifested next to me, and we watched them go.

I had gotten to know Mr. Whitlock while prepping his body over the past week, and I wasn’t sure that I would have liked the man while he was alive.

He was a God-fearing man, and he had made some questionably homophobic comments while I had been embalming him. However, despite the errant comments, my heart went out to him now.

He clearly loved his wife, and the spirit’s eyes welled with tears as she broke down at the sight of his body lying in the open casket.

‘*Silly woman,*’ he muttered gruffly, though there was clear affection in his tone. ‘*Always kicking up a fuss.*’

His spirit attempted to float closer to his grieving wife, but he was forced to stop by some unseen barrier. A frown creased my brow when I realized it was because Cal, as always, was diligently wearing his talisman.

Mr. Whitlock couldn’t get any closer to Cal than the ghouls that haunted him.

Well, this was an unforeseen problem.

I didn’t know what to do. On the one hand, he was doing an excellent job consoling the grieving widow. A much better job than I ever would have done. He had his arm draped over her shoulder, and she was leaning into him like she might literally be swept away by her grief, and he was the only thing tethering her to this earth.

I didn’t want to call him away from her. But it didn’t feel right that the spirit of her husband couldn’t approach her either...

The talisman was a catch-all and couldn’t determine the difference between malevolent spirits and harmless ones... If Cal was going to help me here, I was going to need to find a way to banish the evil spirits that haunted him for good.

“Ryan?” A familiar female voice washed over me as I struggled with my indecision.

I turned to find Joanna standing in the doorway, and I couldn’t keep the shock off my face.

“Joanna?” I rasped, panic taking over.

Fuck.

Cal was going to lose his fucking *mind* if he saw that Joanna was here!

“What are you doing here?” I blurted, unable to keep my surprise under wraps. However, I immediately regretted the harsh words when I noticed how pale she was and the dark bags under her eyes.

Her lower lip trembled, and guilt flooded my gut.

This was a woman in *pain*.

“I’m here for my grandfather’s funeral,” she whispered, and all of a sudden, I knew why Mrs. Whitlock seemed so familiar. I had briefly met her at a few of the church events Joanna had asked me to accompany her to.

Looking at Joanna’s devastated expression, our history suddenly didn’t matter anymore. All that mattered was making sure this person before me was able to grieve in a safe, supportive environment.

“Of course.” I straightened, immediately falling back into the professional version of myself that I had been honing for years.

I reached out and took her hand gently.

“Come. Your grandmother is in the viewing room. Let’s go together,” I said gently.

Her lip trembled, and her eyes filled with tears. She nodded, sniffing softly.

“Thank you, Ryan,” she whispered, and I squeezed her hand reassuringly.

“Of course, Joanna. Come on. Your grandfather’s in here,” I replied, steering her into the viewing room to join Cal and her grandmother.

92



Cal Walker

I wasn't sure if it was against the rules to hold patrons while they cried, but I didn't really care if it was. The woman shaking in my arms was so small and frail that my heart broke for her.

She *needed* someone to hold onto; I could feel it. I knew what it was to feel like you were drowning with no one to lean on.

If I could be that person for this small, broken human, I would be.

I didn't tell her everything was going to be okay because, frankly, the man she loved was dead, and *nothing* about that was okay. So I just held her, whispering the odd, '*I know, I know,*' as she shook in my arms.

Ryan led another guest up to the casket to join us, and I did a double take as I realized I recognized the woman he had led into the viewing room.

It was fucking Joanna.

A confusing rollercoaster of emotions rolled through me. My gaze fell down to where Ryan was clutching her hand, and I stiffened as jealousy and rage exploded in my chest at the fact that she was *touching him*.

I almost completely lost it, but she made a choking sound and sank to her knees before the casket. She buried her face in her hands, and a painful sob wracked through her lungs, causing me to wince.

Like a switch had been flipped, all my anger disappeared when I realized she wasn't here for Ryan. She was here because the dead man in this casket had meant something to her, and now he was gone forever.

I met Ryan's tense gaze, and I pursed my lips. It felt strange without my lip ring, which I had removed for the service.

Ryan seemed to be begging me not to make a scene with his eyes, and I let him see that he had nothing to worry about.

Since meeting Ryan, I had begun to learn that no matter what Damian and my fucked up mother had tried to tell me, I *wasn't* a monster.

Whatever feelings of animosity I'd felt toward Joanna were not important enough to add to her suffering.

I had no interest in being cruel to someone who was already clearly living through what was probably one of the worst days of their lives.

More guests began to file into the viewing room, and I gently untangled myself from Mrs. Whitlock.

"Is this your daughter?" I asked her gently, and she sniffed.

"Granddaughter."

"I'll leave you two to say your goodbyes," I told her, and she reached for Joanna, pulling her up off the ground and into her arms. The two of them clung to each other, and I slipped away, giving them some privacy so I could go greet the other guests.

Ryan was watching me with a look on his face that made me weak at the knees. I forced back the small smile that twitched at the corner of my mouth. It felt inappropriate, considering the fact that we were managing a funeral, but I couldn't help the warm and fuzzy feeling I got whenever he looked at me like that.

Like I was everything he could have ever wanted.

Like he *needed* me.

It was the best feeling in the whole fucking world, and literally *nothing* could take this high away from me.

I may not have necessarily ever seen myself working in a funeral home... but if doing this job made Ryan look at me like *that*, there was literally nothing else on this planet that I would rather do with my life.



AFTER THE WAKE, PEOPLE STARTED TO SLOWLY TRICKLE OUT OF FAIRVIEW. I stood by the door, saying goodbye to people as they filed out.

I had met Joanna's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Caldwell, and immediately understood why she had gone to such desperate lengths to please them. Mr. Caldwell seemed like a serious hardass, and her mother was unfriendly as fuck.

I supposed my first impression of them *was* at a funeral, but still. I had a knack for feeling people out, and let me tell ya, these people were *not* it.

While I kept myself busy saying goodbye to patrons, I kept one eye on Ryan. He was bustling about in '*Ryan mode*' doing his Ryan things, but he kept talking to himself quietly, and it was honestly freaking me out.

I remembered the shadows that seemed to follow him around in the surveillance cameras. There had also been a few times I had been sparring in the basement with Theo while Ryan was in the other room working on Mr. Whitlock.

I could have sworn I heard him talking to someone then, too. But whenever I went to check and see who it was, no one was there, and he always got all red and awkward.

Brushing my fingers over the lump in my pocket that signaled Iris's weird pouch of witchy goodies, I bit my lip.

For some reason, I had this super strange feeling that Ryan could see ghosts or something. Maybe I would have thought that was far-fetched before I met Iris, but after spending weeks sharing a space with her, it seemed more than plausible.

Resolving to ask Ryan about it when we were alone, I nodded at the last patron and made my way into the viewing room to help clean up.

I paused, however, when I noticed someone was still in here. Not just *anyone*.

Joanna.

She was sitting in one of the empty chairs, staring at the empty space where her grandfather's coffin had been with tear-stained cheeks.

She looked so fucking sad, I couldn't bring myself to just leave her there. So, I made my way over, doing my best to come off as non-

threatening as possible.

I wasn't sure if the non-threatening thing was working, considering her eyes widened in fear when she noticed me approaching, and she leapt to her feet.

"I-I'm sorry. I didn't mean to linger. I'll go..." she stammered, and I shook my head, holding my hand palms up to show her that I wasn't here to hurt her or be mean.

"No, no, stay. I'm sorry about how I acted last time. That wasn't cool... I just... You were a bit of a shock, and I was angry and didn't know how to deal with it. I'm sorry I took it out on you."

She paused, eyeing me wearily, wringing her hands together.

"I promise, I come in peace. I just came to see if you wanted some company or someone to talk to. I'm sure today was rough."

Her eyes welled with tears again, and she nodded. Gesturing to the empty chairs, I sat down, hoping she would follow suit.

She folded herself into the seat next to me and returned to her staring competition with the empty podium.

"So, you and your grandfather... you guys were close?" I asked, and she let out a breathy laugh that I couldn't interpret.

"I guess you could say that." She sighed. "My grandfather was a very... strict man, much like my father. He was very... *involved* in my life. Whether I wanted him to be or not."

She stiffened, then turned wide, fearful eyes on me.

"Oh my... that was a horrible thing to say..."

I shrugged. "I've heard worse."

Her mouth parted, and I placed a hand over hers, giving her fingers a squeeze.

"Listen, it's okay to mourn the loss of someone and still not be okay with everything they did while they were still here with us. When people die, we tend to try to focus on the good in them so we can remember them fondly, which is nice. But grief is complicated. Just because someone has passed, it doesn't wipe away the times that they might have hurt us."

My own feelings about Damian welled up inside me as the words left my mouth. Sometimes, I felt sad that he was gone and I would never see him again. Then I would usually feel guilty about mourning the loss of someone who had brainwashed and abused me my entire life... But Ryan always told me that it made sense to miss the closest thing I had to a father.

I was the victim in this situation, and however I decided to deal with Damian's death was the right way to do it.

"I don't want to pry or anything, but I get the feeling that if you needed to fake date my boyfriend to make your family happy, that maybe whatever you're feeling right now is valid."

She blinked at me, and I held my breath. I wasn't sure if what I had said would offend her, and I didn't want to overstep on my first day on the job, but my entire body relaxed when her eyes softened, and she nodded.

"I tried so hard for him, but I just... I just can't be who he wanted me to be." Her gaze drifted back to the empty podium as if she could still see her grandfather lying there.

"We got in a fight a few weeks ago. I tried to put my foot down with him. It didn't go well, and I threatened never to speak to him again... and now..." A large tear spilled over her cheek, and she broke down, dropping her face into her hands. "And now I never will..."

Without thinking, I draped my arm over her shoulder and held her while she cried.

"Let it out..." I murmured, rocking her gently as she sobbed.

There were no words that would help her through this, so I stayed quiet. Ryan came in at one point, and his eyes filled with sympathy as he watched me do my best to comfort Joanna.

He left me to it, a small grateful smile ghosting on his lips.

After a long while, Joanna untangled herself from me and wiped her cheek with the back of her hand. I handed her a tissue and gave her a tentative smile.

"Thank you," she sniffed. I shrugged.

"No need to thank me. I didn't do much."

She shook her head. "You did more than you know. I think I just needed to not feel judged for a minute."

"No judgment here, sweetheart." I grinned. She smiled back, still wiping her tears away.

"I'm really glad Ryan found someone like you," she said softly. "He deserves someone who looks out for him and loves him just the way he is."

My heart swelled with warmth at her words, and I suddenly couldn't remember why I hated her so much.

"Yeah, well, maybe the three of us could hang out sometime. You know, if you ever need some friends who run in different circles."

The smile she gave me made the whole room light up, and I felt so *fucking good* that something I said was the reason she no longer looked like there was no hope in the world.

“I would really like that,” she whispered, and I squeezed her hand gently.

“Me too.” I winked. She giggled before getting to her feet.

“Thanks again, Callum,” she said, and I walked her out, feeling like maybe Ryan was right. It felt way better to help people than it ever had to hurt them.

For the first time in my life, I really felt like I found somewhere I belonged.

OceanofPDF.com

93



Cal Walker

“No, we’re going to need two cars, *believe* me,” Naomi insisted.
I exchanged an amused look with Theo.

“You’re moving into a dorm, gnomes. How much shit are you really going to need?” Theo asked, rubbing the back of her neck as she eyed my spacious G-Wagon.

Naomi held up her index finger like she was about to give a lecture.

“It’s always best to prepare for the worst, Theodora. If you don’t believe me, just ask Ryan. He’ll agree that it’s better to bring two cars now than to get there and realize we don’t have enough space and have to make a second trip.”

Ryan chuckled and pulled the keys to the hearse out of his pocket.

“I mean, normally, I would agree with you, gnomes, but I went with you on your dorm tour, remember? You’re basically moving into a closet.”

“Hey! It is not a *closet*! It is my *humble abode*. Don’t disrespect my new pad!”

Ryan rolled his eyes, though he was grinning.

“Alright, alright.” Ryan tossed the keys to Theo. “You take the hearse, Theo. Cal and I will follow you guys in the wagon.”

“Squeeee!” Naomi squealed and bounded up to Ryan’s spooky corpse mobile. “Thanks, Ry-guy! You’re the best!” she chirped as she climbed into the passenger seat. Theo got into the driver’s side, somehow looking both annoyed and amused at the same time.

I chuckled and fired up the g wagon, pairing my phone and putting on a ‘*best of Skrillex*’ playlist. Ryan smiled at my music choice as he climbed in. He buckled up as I waited for our sisters to pull out before following them down the drive and onto the street.

“Well, she’s excited.” Ryan grinned, and I laughed.

“Yeah, no kidding.”

Naomi had been accepted into several schools but had chosen to go to Cleveland State so she could stay close to home. She didn’t really need to stay in a dorm. It wouldn’t be a far commute for her to drive from Fairview, but she insisted that she needed the full experience.

Vox seemed weirdly grumpy about the whole thing, but I just chalked it up to his overprotective big-brotherish behavior. He’s always treated my sisters like family, and I could tell he was worried about sending Naomi off to school without one of us around to watch over her. If you asked me, it was super fucking cute, and I low-key loved it.

“Is everything good to go for the service tomorrow?” I asked Ryan. I’d double-checked that all my responsibilities were taken care of, but I liked to help Ryan out with his tasks, too, if I could.

Because I hadn’t gone to mortuary school, there were just some tasks that Ryan had to handle on his own. So, if there were things I could take off his plate, I always did my best to do so.

He gave me a warm smile and rested his hand on my thigh. My cock twitched at his gentle touch.

Fuck.

Would I ever get used to him touching me like that? Would there ever be a day when he would put his hands on me, and I wouldn’t be overcome with the aching desire to fuck him senseless?

I didn’t think so.

I had it so bad for this man that it wasn’t even funny.

“Yeah, I think everything’s good to go. I finished up with Ms. Mercer yesterday. She seemed to like... I mean, she looks really good. I think her

family will be happy with her.”

I glanced at him, narrowing my eyes. The tips of his ears were bright red, and he was doing that weird thing with his jaw that he always did when he was anxious.

“Hey, so... I have a weird question,” I said carefully.

“Uhm. Yeah? What is it?” he asked, and I could tell by his tone that he knew I was going to ask about his little slip-up.

“Can you see dead people?”

He instantly started coughing and choking, like he swallowed down the wrong tube.

Keeping one hand on the wheel, I slapped him firmly on the back, doing my best not to chuckle at how flustered he was.

“Wh-what! Why do you say that!?” he rasped, and I frowned at him.

“Well, when I was stalking you and watching you on the cameras, you used to always have these shadows following you around. I always see you talking to no one during services... Also, when you’re in the embalming room, you’re always having full-blown, one-sided conversations with people I can’t see.”

Ryan was staring at me, panicked, which made me frown even more.

“Why are you looking at me like *I’m* the ghost?” I asked, braking for a red light.

“You’re much more observant than people give you credit for,” he muttered, and I laughed.

“Hey, I’m an ex-mercenary. It comes with the territory.” I smirked.

He bit his lip, still looking uncomfortable.

“I don’t know why you felt like you needed to hide this from me. I don’t care if you see dead people. Well... I care in the sense that if it’s adding stress to your life, I want to be able to help. But you don’t seem to be afraid of them.”

“I just... I can’t believe you’re not only cool with it but you... *believe* it, I guess. I’ve never told anyone before. Not even my family.”

I raised an eyebrow, shocked. “Surely Iris knows! She’s super witchy, I bet that’s why she gave me the weird pouch you always make me carry around.”

His lips twitched, and he nodded.

“Yeah. You have some... *unsavory* hitchhikers.”

What the fuck?

“What does *that* mean?” I asked. This was the most interesting conversation I’d ever had in my *life*. How fucking rad was this? My boyfriend could see dead people!

“You uhm... well, you’re haunted, Cal. By the people you’ve killed. Also, your mom—who’s a piece of fucking work, by the way—tends to hang around you like a bad idea.”

“What! My fucking *mom*?” I gaped, and Ryan’s cheeks turned a brilliant crimson.

“Yeah.”

“That fucking *bitch*!” I snarled. “Did she hurt you? I’ll kill her a second fucking time if she puts one goddamn spirit finger on you!” Rage flared in my chest at the fact that even from the fucking grave, there was a chance that psycho bitch might hurt the best thing that had ever happened to me.

Ryan chuckled. “No, she hasn’t hurt me. When I first met you, she passed through me a few times, and it made me feel a little sick, but since you have your talisman, she hasn’t been able to come near me.”

Realization dawned on me. “So that time I barreled into that service without my talisman, my mom was attacking you?”

Ryan nodded. “Not just her. You have a whole gaggle of ghouls that follow you around. If I ever lost you in a crowd, all you would need to do is drop your talisman, and I would be able to find you just from their yowling screams.”

“That’s... metal as *fuck*.” I breathed, and Ryan burst out laughing.

He curled his hand around mine.

“I love the way you react to things. It’s... refreshing.”

I frowned at him. “How am I supposed to react?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Most people would call me a freak.”

Anger simmered in my gut at the way he said it. Like he *believed* he was a freak. I remembered the story he had told me about the time those bitch ass kids had made fun of him for liking flowers, and I clenched my teeth.

“Fuck being normal, Ryan. Normal is boring. I *love* that you see dead people. I think it’s bad fucking *ass* that you live in a funeral home. On top of that, I think it’s hot that you’re a freckly red-headed man who likes gardening. Everything about you is attractive to me. You’re my lil’ spooky ginger boy, and I love the shit out of you.”

He turned his big brandys on me as we pulled into the IKEA parking lot, and I swooned a little.

“Thanks, angel,” he said softly, rubbing his thumb over my knuckles.

I beamed at him. “Anytime, ginger snap. Let me know next time you need a boost. I never get tired of telling you all the things I love about you.”

Turning away from my blushing man, I gazed up at the giant blue and yellow building before us, cocking my head to the side in curiosity.

“I’ve never been to an IKEA before...” I mused out loud.

Ryan made a strange sound, and I glanced at him, confused. He was looking at me like I had just sprouted an extra head.

“*What!?*” he gasped. “I’m taking your IKEA virginity!?”

I gave him a bewildered smile. “Yeah, I guess. What’s so great about it?”

“Oh... baby.” He unbuckled his seatbelt and hopped out of the car, suddenly nearly as excited as my sister had been,

“I can’t believe I’m going to get to experience your first time at IKEA.”

94



Ryan Fairview

Alexa, play: HIT EM WHERE IT HURTS - PawPaw Rod

Watching Cal experience IKEA was like watching a kid walk into a candy store for the first time. He and Naomi were practically *vibrating* with excitement, and it took about five minutes for me to decide it would probably be a good idea to separate them.

“Ginger snap! Look at this tiny kitchen! You would look so good bent over these counters!” he yammered, ripping open drawers and nearly squealing in delight when he found them full of organizers and IKEA cutlery sets.

“It’s set up like a real house! Omg! Look at this mini *living room*! Baby, can we get this couch!?”

We’d barely made it past the first few display rooms, and our cart was already full of random shit we didn’t need.

“He’s adding shit to the cart like he’s fucking Beyonce.” Theo chuckled, and I sighed, doing my best to subtly put things back when he wasn’t looking.

“Yeah, except he doesn’t make Beyonce money anymore. I’m not sure he’s figured that out yet.”

“Why don’t I take him out of the showroom? The marketplace may be less... stimulating.” Theo mused as we watched Cal try on a bathrobe he’d found in one of the tiny fake bathrooms.

“Probably a good idea, I’ll take Naomi through the rest of the showroom. She’s handling it a little better...”

Though not by much. Naomi’s eyes were so big I thought they might pop out of her head. She kept grabbing random throw pillows and picture frames and showing them to Cal with stars in her eyes. Then, Cal would agree that she absolutely could *not live without* this new addition, and somehow, it would end up in the cart.

“Alright, rockstar, let’s get out of here,” Theo grumbled, hooking her arm through Cal’s elbow. “Let’s go see if we can find your sister something she actually needs... Like a cheese grater or something.”

I chuckled, appreciative that Theo was clearly attempting to divert Cal’s attention to lower-ticket items.

“Let’s head toward the bedroom section, Gnomes. I don’t think you need most of this stuff in a dorm. You mostly need bedding and maybe a shower caddy or something.”

Naomi allowed me to lead her through the maze, still clearly completely enamored with everything we passed. We arrived in the bedding section and were looking at the options for duvets when someone bumped into me from behind, hard enough that I nearly dropped the desk lamp I’d been holding.

“Watch it!” the man said, and I turned around to see who was dickish enough to nearly run me over and then be an ass about it.

Then, to my complete and utter horror, I came face to face with Kenny *fucking* Samuels.

I hadn’t seen him since high school, and the years had not been kind to him. He’d played football and really filled out during senior year, but now that extra muscle seemed to have turned into bulky weight.

His gut was round, and his cheeks swelled with disgust as he realized who it was he had run into.

“Ryan? *Ryan Fairview?*” he hollered, and Naomi looked back and forth between us, her eyes narrowing.

She pulled out her phone, and I saw her fire off a text to Cal, which made my blood run cold. The *last* thing I wanted was for Cal to cross paths with this asshole.

It had taken me all morning to convince him he didn’t need to bring his gun with us to IKEA, and now I was glad I’d taken the time to do that.

Cal had been doing so well lately. He hadn’t killed anyone since Damian, and I didn’t want Kenny fucking Samuels to make him relapse. Because I knew in my bones that if Cal caught this man saying anything negative to me, Kenny could kiss his little life goodbye.

“Hey, Kenny,” I mumbled, doing my best to drop my gaze and push past him. “We were just leaving.”

“Ha!” He laughed. “I have to say I’m shocked to find an *undertaker* at an IKEA. Didn’t think your type shopped at places like this... though I guess it makes sense. Don’t faggots love interior design?”

I froze, feeling the blood drain from my face. Objectively, I knew that Kenny’s words should hold no weight with me. However, they triggered some deep-seated insecurities that I had been struggling with since I was a child.

Just like that, I was suddenly eight years old again, and the entire class was laughing at me.

Faggot!

Undertaker!

Freak!

I was still struggling to shove back the sudden and powerful feelings of inferiority when Cal and Theo appeared. Cal was still far enough away that I wasn’t sure if he heard the slur, but Naomi sure fucking had.

“I’m sorry... Did you just call him the ‘F’ word?” she asked. She didn’t even sound angry. She sounded like she literally couldn’t believe he’d made a comment like that.

Cal and Theo had now joined the conversation, and my face was burning so hot that I was worried my cheeks might melt off.

“Ah. Kenny. Nice to see you’re still a bigoted piece of shit. How’s your nose? Looks a little crooked to me,” Theo sneered, shoving her hands into her pockets and shooting Kenny a sly smirk.

Cal was frowning, his gaze bouncing between the four of us.

“Kenny... why does that name sound...”

I saw it the moment he figured out who Kenny was, and suddenly, his pupils blew. I watched him instinctively reach for his gun, and once again, I was grateful I had talked him out of bringing it.

Immediately, I grabbed Cal’s arm, pulling him back into me.

“Shh, angel. Please don’t. He’s not worth it,” I murmured into his ear, but I was worried he might already be too far gone. He had that cold, dead look he got on his face when his demons were whispering to him, and I was suddenly very worried he would be going home in the back of a cop car.

Kenny’s grin widened as he took in the intimate way I grabbed Cal’s arm. He opened his mouth, and I cursed a god I didn’t believe in for making this man so incredibly stupid that he couldn’t recognize the fact he was staring death in the face.

“I knew it! You ARE a faggot! HAHAAHAH! What are the chances your mom squeezed out two abominations? Jesus, I’m pro-life and all, but your dad probably should have worn a rubber.”

Cal jerked out of my grip so fast I wouldn’t have been able to hold him back if I tried.

I was already trying to think of what I would say to the police when Naomi started cracking up laughing.

The sound was so unexpected that even Cal stopped moving. We all turned to look at her in surprise, but she could barely breathe; she was laughing so hard.

“Holy shit, is this *real*!?” She gasped.

She stepped toward Kenny and poked him in the stomach as if checking to make sure he wasn’t a hallucination.

“Am I getting punked?” she asked, sobering slightly but looking around as if checking for hidden cameras. “I mean, I’ve seen bigots and stuff on TV, but I didn’t realize people like you were actually just out in the wild, walking among us. Christ, you’re like a cartoon character.”

She was staring at him in awe.

“It’s like seeing a chimpanzee at the zoo... *poor things*. They don’t know any better, do they? They’re just not as *evolved* as we are.”

We all looked at Kenny to see what he would say.

He was frowning at her, clearly confused. I think he could tell she was insulting him, but he wasn’t bright enough to figure out exactly *how* she was doing it.

Theo leaned in to mutter in Naomi's ear. She was smirking at Kenny while she spoke, looking sly as a fucking fox.

"Ah, yes. The common bigot is more rare than they were in my day, but they're still around. In my experience, the homophobic ones are usually super gay themselves."

Naomi's eyes widened, and she nodded in mock seriousness, still examining Kenny like she was a scientist and he was an interesting new specimen she had just come across in the field.

"Do you think *this* one is gay?" she whispered.

Kenny sputtered.

"What!? I'm not gay! I'm here with my pregnant wife!" he bellowed, and Naomi looked shocked.

"Oh my gosh, does she know?"

"Does she know what?"

"Does she know that you're gay?"

Kenny's face passed red and went straight to purple. The corner of my mouth twitched, and suddenly, I was laughing.

I can't believe I used to be scared of this jackass.

Kenny lunged for Naomi, but Cal intercepted. He wrapped his hand around Kenny's flabby throat and manhandled him so fucking effortlessly that even Kenny's idiot ass seemed to realize he was out of his league.

"Touch her, and I'll paint the floors red with your fucking face," Cal growled, and Kenny's purple face turned white.

Theo smirked at him.

"I would get out of here if I were you. This one's a little psycho. Would be a shame if your pregnant wife became a pregnant widow."

People were staring now, and my anxiety mounted. Not only did I *hate* having attention like this on me, but I *really* didn't want to get kicked out of my local IKEA.

How embarrassing.

"Hey, everybody! This guy called my friend here a *faggot*! To his *face*! Can you believe that!?" Naomi shouted to the gathering crowd.

"Oh my god! That's horrible!" one woman exclaimed, and Naomi nodded.

"Right? Like, how out of touch *is* this guy?"

"Grow up, buddy!" another man yelled from the audience. Next thing I knew, security was called, but it wasn't Cal who was getting kicked out; it

was Kenny and his very confused wife.

The crowd applauded as Kenny was led out by the staff, and Naomi smirked, elbowing Cal jovially in the ribs.

“Take notes, big brother. *That’s* how you destroy a man. And I didn’t even need a gun.” She grinned.

Cal’s pupils were still blown, and he was clenching and unclenching his fists at his sides, staring after Kenny like he wasn’t ready to let him go.

“Angel...” I slipped my hand into his, and he jerked his head to face me, a strange muscle in his jaw bouncing.

“Did he touch you?” he growled, and I shook my head.

“No angel. I’m okay,” I said, reaching up to brush my fingers against his cheek.

“I want to kill him.”

“I know, baby. What can I do?” I whispered, and his eyes darkened even further. Lacing his fingers through mine, he pulled me away.

“Finish up with Naomi,” he barked over his shoulder at Theo. “We’ll meet you in the parking lot.”

95



Ryan Fairview

Alexa, play: Little Did I Know - Julia Michaels

Cal dragged me through the showroom and down into the warehouse. Considering the fact that we were out shopping on a weekday, the warehouse felt deserted as I rushed to keep up with Cal's quick pace.

"Where are we going?" I asked, somewhat out of breath. Cal glanced over his shoulder, his eyes still unnervingly dark.

"I need to fuck you," he rumbled, and I nearly fainted.

"*Here!?*" I rasped as he shoved me down an aisle in the very back of the store. "We can't! This is a self-serve warehouse, Cal! This is where people come to get their furniture. Someone could see!"

"Then you better come quick," he snarled, tossing me down the industrial aisle.

I stumbled over my words as his eyes darted around the shelves, and he pulled a box down, ripping it open and sliding out a large mirror.

“What are you doing!?” I asked as he leaned it against one of the steel racks so we were looking back at ourselves in its reflection.

He cuffed my throat and forced my head back so I was looking at him. He searched my eyes as if looking for something.

“Did he hurt you?”

“No, I told you he didn’t touch me—”

“He doesn’t have to *touch* you to hurt you, Ryan,” Cal growled. He tapped his finger gently on my temple. “Did he hurt you up here? I saw the look on your face. He made you feel ashamed of yourself.”

My cheeks flushed, and my mouth fell open in surprise. For some reason, even though we had been together for a few months now, it still surprised me how much he paid attention to me.

“I—, uhm... I don’t—”

Cal gripped my jaw firmly, his dark eyes flashing with anger. I knew he wasn’t angry with me. He was angry that he couldn’t kill the man that had hurt me.

“I promised you I wouldn’t murder any more people, and you promised me you would be what I needed when the urges came.”

I couldn’t even speak; I just nodded, swallowing loudly.

“I need you to see yourself the way I see you.” He jerked his head toward the mirror he had set up, and I glanced at it in confusion.

“Put your hands on either side of the mirror and bend over. Look at yourself,” he ordered.

“Cal, I can’t. This is too much; someone could walk back here at any moment—”

He cupped my rock-hard dick over my pants and let out a low rumble growl in my ear.

“Don’t act like you don’t fucking love it. You love that someone might see. You get off on the fear, Ryan. Now, let’s skip the part where you pretend you don’t want this before I hunt that cunt down and rip his goddamn intestines out in the parking lot.”

I whimpered, crushing my eyes closed against the intense wave of excitement and fear that his words drew out of me.

Finally, I nodded and did what he said.

Putting my hands on each side of the mirror, I gripped the rack as Cal reached around my waist. He wasted no time undoing my jeans. I shuddered as he slipped my pants down over my ass. The cool air on my

skin was an immediate cue that we were about to do something super fucking illegal. If we got caught, we would absolutely get arrested.

“Eyes open, Ryan. I want you to look at yourself while we do this.”

I hadn’t even realized I’d shut my eyes, but they flew open at his words. Staring at myself this close to the mirror was incredibly awkward for some reason.

I watched my own cheeks flush red as I made eye contact with myself.

I hated that I blushed so much.

I hated that I was ginger.

It had just been one more thing for people to make fun of me for...

He cracked a hand over my ass so hard I hissed in pain.

“Whatever you’re thinking is going to get you punished, ginger snap.”

I flinched as I felt the familiar dribble of cold lube splash against my bare cheeks, and I frowned.

Did he just carry packets of lube everywhere he fucking went?

“Cal—*fuck!*” I whined, inadvertently closing my eyes again as he scooped a finger full of lube directly into my hole. He pumped in and out of me, digging deep to find my prostate.

My cock surged as his fingers hit that magical spot, and I whimpered as he stroked me.

“What did I just say? Eyes open. Look at yourself. Look at that beautiful face. Tell me what you see.”

“Cal—” I complained. I didn’t want to look at myself. I didn’t think I was beautiful. Never in my life had I looked at myself and thought I was attractive. I was too freckly, too pale. My hair was too red.

He notched the tip of his fat cock against me, and I forced myself to relax. I had a feeling this was going to be quick and rough.

My suspicions proved to be correct when he forced himself into me in one quick thrust.

To keep myself from crying out, I bit my lip so hard I tasted blood. The burning sting ached so fucking good; my cock leaked where it hung heavy between my spread legs.

“*JesusChristRyan...*” he groaned, already pumping in and out of me in a slow, punishing rhythm. “You’re so *tight*, baby.” Reaching around my waist, he fisted my cock, leaning over my back to whisper in my ear. He made eye contact with me in the mirror, and my cheeks burned an even deeper shade of crimson.

“Look how fucking *gorgeous* you are, Ryan,” he murmured. He sucked my ear lobe into his mouth and pulsed it in time with the smooth motions of his hand.

Planted deep inside me, he ground against my ass, bumping the tip of his cock against my prostate with obvious intention.

I whimpered as he wrapped his other hand around my neck from behind, forcing me to continue to stare at myself while he fucked me in every way a man possibly could.

I could hear the voices of customers shopping from far away. They were several aisles away, but still, I tensed.

They could find us here. We would be so fucked if they found us!

“Cal...” I whimpered. “I can hear people!”

“Then you better come, or they’re going to catch us,” he growled, thrusting so deep inside me again that I was shocked I couldn’t feel his cock in my throat.

“*Please!* You have to go faster.” I panted, and he chuckled, leaving hot kisses up the side of my neck as he continued to leisurely stroke my aching cock.

“I will if you look in the mirror and tell me how sexy you think you are.”

I didn’t think it was possible to blush any harder than I already was.

It felt stupid to compliment myself, especially while looking into my own eyes while I had a dick shoved so far up my ass I could barely breathe. But the longer I hesitated, the less Cal moved, and the farther away my orgasm became.

The voices were closer now. I realized if I didn’t do what he said, we would likely end up in a cop car after all, so I forced myself to comply.

“I—I’m sexy,” I whispered.

Cal groaned like I had just said the hottest thing he’d ever heard, and he started moving again.

“*Fuck*, that’s good, baby.” He bit my ear and pumped my cock again. It felt so fucking amazing, and a familiar heat began to well in my balls. They tightened against me as he stroked me, his fingers tightening around my throat.

“Tell me how smart you are.”

I whimpered but forced the words out of my mouth.

“I’m... *smart*.” I panted, and he thrust deep into me again.

“You are, baby. You’re so *fucking* smart. And *strong* and *brave*. You take so much on without ever complaining, and I’m so *fucking* proud of you.”

I stared at him in the mirror as he slowly pumped in and out of me. His words rolled over me, and my eyes pricked with tears. A confusing, warm feeling welled up in my chest. It was more than just the way he was making my body feel.

I felt *loved*.

I felt *safe*.

I felt, for the first time in my life, that maybe, just *maybe*, I was *enough*.

I opened my mouth to tell Cal this, but he wasn’t finished. He pressed his lips to my ear again, dropping a soft kiss on my temple.

“Tell me you’re like no one else I’ve ever met. Tell me how *irreplaceable* you are. How you make my whole fucking life worth living.”

“*Cal...*” It was too much. The physical and emotional torture he was wreaking upon me was so overwhelming I felt dizzy on my feet.

“Say it, Ryan!” he snarled, squeezing my dick so hard I yelped.

“Fine! I’m like no one else you’ve ever met! I’m *irreplaceable*!”

“You bet your sweet ass you are.” He snarled, slamming into me just the way I was craving. My cock was swelling in his hand now, and my orgasm was suddenly building so fast I knew I was going to blow with barely any warning.

“Give me one more, sweet thing. Tell me you think you’re beautiful. Look at yourself while you say it.”

I was panting now, and my body was thrumming with so much pleasure that keeping my eyes open was one of the hardest things I’d ever done.

“I’m beautiful! I think that I’m beautiful!” I gasped, and he let out a low moan of approval just as my cock started spurting in his hand.

“*Fuck* yes, you are, Ryan. You’re so *fucking beautiful*.” He groaned as he continued to jack me while I came.

My cum splattered across the mirror, and he held me tight against him as he fucked me through his own orgasm, his hot breath puffing against my sensitive neck with each stroke.

“You’re *everything*, Ryan. You make me want to be a better man,” he breathed, kissing me over and over again on the side of the neck as he gently slipped out of me.

I was panting and feeling overwhelmed with emotion as he tugged my pants back up and carefully tucked me into my boxers.

After doing up his own pants, he pulled me into him, burying his face into the crook of my neck while he held me, whispering words of praise.

You're beautiful.

You're amazing.

You're so strong and passionate.

You're everything I strive to be.

My eyes were welling with tears by the time the shoppers I had heard entered our aisle. They barely looked in our direction as we clung to each other, and I huffed a laugh into Cal's chest.

His T-shirt smelled like clean laundry, and his hard, warm body felt like home.

"How are you feeling?" he asked me after a long moment, pulling back to look me in the eyes.

"I don't know. Definitely feeling good, though." I smiled up at him. "How about you?"

He smirked at me, giving me a lazy shrug.

"Much less murderous, though I hope we don't cross paths with that douche canoe in the parking lot. I'm only human."

I snorted and brushed a soft kiss across his lips.

"I'm proud of you for restraining yourself, angel," I murmured, and he smiled against me, kissing me back.

"Thanks, baby. It was hard, but making you watch yourself come was better than killing that fuck would ever be."

I winced, glancing at the mirror we had just painted with my cum.

"I guess we should probably buy this..." I mumbled, and Cal laughed, grabbing the mirror and sliding it back into its box.

"Probably a good idea. We can use it every time you forget how fucking perfect you are."

I blushed and rubbed the back of my neck, already feeling strange about the way he had forced me to give myself compliments.

"Let's not make a habit of that," I muttered, and he slipped his hand into mine, tucking the mirror under his arm as we made our way out of the store.

"Baby, until you believe those words, I'm going to make you tell me you're beautiful every day." He kissed the side of my head. "This world is

shit enough without you thinking you're anything less than perfect, just the way you are."

OceanofPDF.com

95



Cal Walker

Alexa, play: The Sound of Silence - Disturbed

We met Theo and Naomi in the parking lot. They had already packed the hearse full of furniture and were working on filling up the G-Wagon by the time we arrived.

Naomi had purchased a massive stuffed gnome that was nearly as big as she was, and she was buckling him into the back seat of my car.

“Do you mind if I ride with you, Cal? There’s no room for Mr. Grumble in the hearse.”

“Mr. Grumble?” I asked, cocking my head to the side.

What a dope name for a gnome.

“Yeah. He reminds me of Vox. Look at his white hair poking out under his hat. He needed a grumpy name.”

I couldn’t help it, I *cackled*. Vox would *hate* that. Which made it even better.

I fist-bumped Naomi while Ryan slid our new cum soaked mirror into the hearse. The tips of his ears turned red, despite the fact the mirror was in a box, and there was no way Theo or Naomi could know it was covered in his cum.

“That’s fine, gnomes. You go with Cal. Theo and I can take the hearse.” Ryan said, clearly trying to deflect everyone’s attention from our mirror of shame. Lolz.

I grabbed a fistful of Ryan’s T-shirt before he slipped into the driver’s seat and planted a kiss on his lips.

He let out a surprised *mmphhh!* But the way his lips curled into a smile made my toes tingle.

Fuck I loved this man so much.

“See you at home, angel,” he whispered, giving me one more quick kiss before smiling up at me.

See you at home.

Fuck why did that make me so giddy!

I grinned back, ruffling his hair affectionately.

“Make sure you put that mirror somewhere... *strategic*,” I purred, and he gave me a mock scowl as I made my way back to the G-Wagon.

I slammed the door shut and put on a Taylor Swift playlist while Naomi finished fussing with Mr. Grumble. Ryan and Theo pulled out of the parking lot and were already out of sight by the time she finally crawled into the passenger seat.

“Buckle up, Gnomes,” I ordered before putting the car in gear. She did as she was told, then we were off.

We listened to Taylor sing about heartache in amicable silence for a few moments before she spoke.

“I’m really happy for you, Cal,” she said, and I glanced at her, grinning.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. Ryan’s the best. I’m so glad you found him and that you work with him at Fairview now. It’s a way better fit for you.”

My heart swelled with emotion. At first, I was worried about inserting myself into Ryan’s business. What did I know about the death industry?

However, I had always been a quick study. You had to learn fast if you were a mercenary because if you didn’t, you died.

So, I picked up on the ins and outs quickly. Also, anticipating Ryan’s needs came naturally to me. I had always been programmed to take care of

the people that I loved, and Ryan was no exception. Making him happy made *me* happy, so I personally felt like I was doing a good job, but it was really nice to have Naomi validate that.

“You really think so?” I asked, and she nodded, shooting me a gentle smile as we pulled up to a red light.

“Yeah, Cal. I do. You’re really good at connecting with people and helping them manage their grief. It’s kind of incredible.”

I was about to reply when a black Escalade pulled up annoyingly close behind me. I frowned in the rearview.

That fucker Kenny better not be riding my damn ass...

The windshield was tinted enough that I couldn’t see the driver, which was a bit of a red flag. Though, I wouldn’t put it past someone like Kenny to murder out his douchey SUV because he thought it made him seem cool or something.

“Yeah. As much as I was down to help you kill all those pedos, I never liked you working for that dude. What does Cass call him?”

“The twat waffle.”

“Yeah! That twat waffle.”

The light turned green, and I rolled through the intersection, keeping an eye on the Escalade as I drove.

“Anyway... you think you’re gonna marry him?” Naomi asked.

“Huh?” I replied, somewhat distracted by the asshole that was now straight-up tailgating me.

“Ryan? You think you’re gonna marry him?”

I glanced at Naomi as we approached another intersection. The on-ramp to the highway was to the right, but I wanted to test my theory that the Escalade was following us, so I pulled into the left-hand turn lane.

This road led us away from Silent Hollow and into the boonies. It was less likely that many cars would turn this way after a trip to IKEA.

Sure enough, the car followed me.

My hand instinctively dropped to my hip, reaching for a gun that wasn’t there.

Fuck!

I knew I shouldn’t have let Ryan talk me out of leaving it at home.

“Cal?”

“Gnomes... I need you to text Vox our location,” I said, handing her my phone.

“What, why?”

“Just do it, Naomi. And hold the fuck on. I think we’re being followed, and I’m going to try to lose this prick.”

“Holy shit!” she cried, her face going white. “Okay, I’m on it.” She took my phone, and I hit the gas.

The G-Wagon was a beast. It lurched forward, and in seconds, we were shooting down the country road at Mach 5.

The Escalade immediately matched my pace, and any hopes that I had about being an overly paranoid psycho flew out the window.

That car was following us. This was a chase, and it was fucking on.

“Get down!” I shouted at Naomi. “Get as low as you fucking can!”

The Escalade was trying to pull up beside us, and panic rolled through me at the thought of whoever it was potentially having a gun. If they shot through the passenger side and Naomi got hit, I didn’t know what the fuck I would do. Fucking Christ, I wanted my gun.

Why the fuck had I left my shit at home!?

We were coming up to a four-way stop, and my heart skipped a beat when I clocked two more black Escalades waiting for us.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck!

They were stationed on either side of the intersection, and as I approached, they rolled forward to block the road.

Naomi was slumped low in the seat, but I instinctively threw my arm across her chest as I gunned it, hoping to make it through the intersection before the SUVs could block us.

“You’re not gonna make it!” Naomi screamed.

“I’m going to fucking make it!” I snarled, trying to push the pedal down further despite the fact that it was already on the floor.

We both ended up being *kind* of right. We made it there before they could fully block us, but I clipped one of the cars as I went by, causing the wagon to fishtail.

“FUCK!” I snarled, fighting the steering wheel as it tried to rip out of my grip. Tires squealed, and there was a slow-motion moment where I was pretty sure the car caught air.

And then...

We were rolling.

Scrrrrrrreeeechhhhh!

CRUNCH, POP, CRASH!

Glass rained down around me like a thousand tiny bullets, and I felt my collarbone break as my seat belt snapped across my chest. Both airbags exploded, and I regretted telling Naomi to get low as it slammed directly into her face.

Her screams were abruptly cut off as the car rolled, and fear like I had never experienced before exploded through me.

“NAOMI!” I could barely hear my voice as I screamed her name, though the car didn’t seem to be moving anymore. Taylor Swift’s ‘*Shake It Off*’ was blaring through the speakers, and it felt like a cruel taunt.

There was a ringing in my ears that told me my body was going into shock.

I couldn’t go into shock. I needed to get to fucking Naomi.

The car had landed on the passenger side door, and I couldn’t see her. The airbags deflated, and she was obscured by the white material.

I tried to move the airbag, but pain screamed up my arm, reminding me of the *snap* I’d felt earlier.

Fuck, this was bad. This was so fucking bad.

“Naomi!” I was screaming. Every time I screamed her name and she didn’t answer, I grew more and more panicked.

I fumbled to release my seatbelt with the hand that still worked, half hoping I could get free, half worried that I would crush my sister if I released the belt and fell.

Suddenly, the driver’s side door opened, and a man in full SWAT gear appeared. He was wearing a ballistic helmet, tactical goggles, and a balaclava. There was no way I could identify him.

I was trapped with only one working arm, still fighting against the shock, when he stuck a needle into my neck and injected me with some shit that burned.

“*You fucking bitch!*” I snarled, knowing the game was already over.

My vision quickly started to go blurry, and all I could do was pray that Naomi had successfully dropped a pin to Vox.

Though, even if he found the car, I had a feeling we would be long gone by the time he got here.

“He’s with the girl! Help me pull him out; we’ll need to extract her next.”

Fuck.

Whatever the man had injected me with was working fast. I knew I only had a few seconds left before I was passed out.

Would they kill me?

At least if they did, I now knew Ryan could see dead people... Could I find him as a ghost and tell him where they were keeping Naomi?

Wait.

Ryan's words from earlier rang through my mind.

'You have a whole gaggle of ghouls that follow you around. If I ever lost you in a crowd, all you would need to do is drop your talisman, and I would be able to find you just from their yowling screams.'

Carefully, with the arm that still worked, I forced my fingers into the front pocket of my jeans. It was nearly an impossible task to pull out the talisman with whatever drugs were in my system, but I managed it.

The last thing I did before my vision went black was drop the talisman, hoping like hell that it would be enough for Vox and Ryan to find us.

OceanofPDF.com

97



Ryan Fairview

Both mine and Theo's phones vibrated as we pulled up to Fairview. I frowned down at the text when I saw it was from Naomi.

She'd written in our group chat, dropping a location pin.

Theo parked the car, and I barely had time to process the message when the back door blew open, and Vox, who I had never seen run in my *life*, basically sprinted to his new Aston Martin.

This one was a shiny, black DB12 since he never recovered the red two-seater after Cal blew up Apex.

I finished reading the text, and my stomach *dropped*.

NAOMI:

Cal says we're being followed! There's a scary black car tailgating us! Here's our location!

I lost time. I don't remember exiting the hearse, but suddenly, I had Vox's arm in a death grip, ripping him back out of the luxury sedan.

“I’m coming with you!” I snarled, and Vox turned furious eyes on me. He shook his head, but I slammed him against the side of the car.

“That wasn’t a *fucking* question. I’m coming.”

I couldn’t do this again.

If anything fucking happened to Cal, I was done. Terror rolled through me, but it was tinged red with rage.

I had *just* started fixing my man up. He was *finally* getting better, and now someone thought they could take him away from me again?

I would fucking *kill everyone* that stood in my way before I let that happen.

“We’ve been training for *weeks*, Vox. I can handle a gun. I know how to fight. Cal is *mine*. I will not fucking sit here while he’s in trouble. You either take me with you, or I’m going on my fucking own.”

“I’m coming, too,” Theo said, pocketing her phone. She looked just as pissed as I did. I glanced at Theo, surprised, and she glowered at me.

“They’re my family now, too, Ryan. If anyone hurts either of them, I’m taking no prisoners.”

Vox’s silver eyes darted back and forth between us, and then he seemed to deflate and nodded abruptly. I released him, and he stalked to the trunk of his new car. Popping it open, he rummaged around before pulling out what looked like two Kevlar vests.

He tossed one to each of us before shrugging into one himself.

It was super lightweight and adjustable. Once I had it on and fitting like a glove, Vox started handing out weapons.

Both Theo and I were given handguns.

Vox gave us each a Glock 19, and I was pleased with myself for recognizing the guns after working so hard to be better at this stuff with Vox. I slipped into the vinyl holster he handed me. Suited up and ready to go, I pulled the passenger seat of the Aston Martin forward so Theo could climb in the back.

Slipping into the front, Vox leaped in next to me and fired up the engine.

None of us spoke as Vox shot down the street toward the location Naomi had sent us. It wasn’t far from the IKEA we’d just left, and I prayed that we weren’t too late.

98



Ryan Fairview

Seeing Cal's totaled G-Wagon was probably one of the worst moments of my life. I was halfway out of the Aston Martin when Vox grabbed me by my vest and ripped me back down.

Feeling like I was underwater, I stared at him, my heart hammering so hard in my chest that I felt like I was going to puke the entire organ up.

He held up a finger and reached for a small pad he kept in the inner console.

Vox hadn't written me a note since the last time Cal was in trouble, so as much as I wanted to run to the wreck, I waited for Vox to finish writing.

Vox only made the effort to communicate with actual words when the situation was dire. As much as I had improved with using a gun and was pretty confident in my boxing abilities—which had also improved since regularly sparring with Vox and Cal—I had never been in a combat situation before. I knew I needed to follow Vox's lead if I wanted to survive whatever it was we were getting into... but it was fucking *hard*.

Stay here. I will check to see if they're still in the car, but I doubt it. Whoever did this may still be watching the scene. We can't make it easy for them to pick us off.

This, of course, made sense, but it didn't make it any easier for me to stay in the car. Fighting against the screaming instinct to barrel full steam ahead, I forced myself to stay put while Vox got out to investigate.

I watched him approach the wreck, admiring how professional he was about all of this. He stayed low to the ground, holding his gun in a two-handed hold pointed at the ground as he moved.

He used every piece of cover he possibly could, and he was constantly scanning his surroundings.

"He reminds me of a big cat," Theo mused from the back seat. I didn't answer, I couldn't. All I could do was worry.

Suddenly, I caught movement out of the corner of my eyes, and my gaze landed on the spirit of a young man standing by the side of the road.

He had soft, light brown hair and piercing blue eyes. The spirit was looking at Vox like the sight of the mercenary caused him pain. He was acting as if he wanted to reach out to Vox, but something was preventing him from approaching the wrecked car that Vox was now investigating.

I rolled down the window and called out to the spirit before I could stop myself.

"Hey!" I hissed, trying to both keep my voice down but also project at the same time.

The spirit glanced at me, then looked over his shoulder before looking back in my direction with a look of disbelief on his face.

He pointed to himself as if to say, '*You talking to me?*' and I nodded urgently.

"Yeah. You. Come over here," I ordered.

"Who the fuck are you talking to?" Theo hissed.

I glanced back at her, not even caring anymore about sounding like a psycho.

"There's a spirit here. I want to find out if he saw anything."

I expected Theo to scoff or at least look surprised, but she just looked pumped.

“Dope. I fucking *knew* you could see dead people.”

I didn't have time to feel shocked that Theo had suspected my little secret all this time.

I was officially the least stealthy person on the planet. Apparently, everyone knew I was gay, and they also knew I could see ghosts.

Fuck me, I guess.

'Holy shit, that chick wasn't kidding. You really can see us!'

The spirit was beaming at me through the window, his tanned skin making his teeth pop. He looked like he belonged on a beach somewhere, catching waves.

“Sorry, who told you that?”

'One of the ghosts that's stuck haunting Callum. Poor thing, she's missing an eye. I think Damian shot her in the face. Anyway, she told me to come here in case you came by to find him. I know where he is! You have to tell Vox right away! He'll save him.'

“You know where Callum is!?” I nearly screamed, and the spirit nodded urgently.

'Yes! Damian has him, and he took his sister too. You have to hurry; he's going to hurt them if you don't save them soon.'

“Vox!” I was already shouting, and the mercenary hopped out of the wrecked car, dragging Naomi's giant gnome with him. He looked *furios* as he stalked toward me, holding his gun in one hand and the massive stuffed gnome in the other.

The spirit's eyes were glassy with tears as they fell on Vox, and I frowned at him.

'Fuck. Voxy...' he whispered, reaching out to brush his fingers through Vox's arm. *“I miss you, man...”*

“Vox, I know where they are!”

Vox rolled his eyes and shook his head like he was going to brush me off.

“I'm serious! Vox! Listen to me!”

The spirit glanced at me and frowned as Vox continued to ignore me in favor of shoving the gnome into the back seat of the car next to Theo.

'Tell him you're talking to Gavin,' the spirit said, and I didn't hesitate.

“Gavin's spirit is here. He's telling me he knows where Cal and Naomi are. Damian took them. We have to go *now*.”

Vox froze. I had never seen the mercenary look shocked before. His face was usually an impassive, grumpy wall. But the second Gavin's name left my mouth, his silver eyes widened, and his lips parted in shock.

"I would listen to him if I were you. Ryan's always had a weird thing with the dead. Don't waste time being a non-believer," Theo said, and Vox glanced at her before finally nodding. He looked at me with an expression that said: *I'm listening*.

I looked to Gavin, whose lips formed a firm line.

"They're in the basement at Apex. You guys might need some help getting in. Do you have any friends that can help?"

OceanofPDF.com

99



Cal Walker

My consciousness came back in phases.

The first thing I became aware of was the fact that my hands were tied behind my back. I groaned as I shifted in what felt like a steel chair. I felt like my ankles were tied to the legs, limiting my mobility even further.

“Ah. You’re awake.”

I knew that voice. It was the voice that whispered to me every night in my nightmares. It was a voice I never thought I would hear again.

“Damian,” I croaked, rolling my head up from where it had been lolling against my chest.

I was in a concrete room again, though there was no bathtub in sight. Just me, Damian, and this fucking chair.

A single light hung from the ceiling, flickering slightly in the dank space, casting eerie shadows across the face of my captor.

A face that was barely recognizable anymore.

Damian was no longer the strikingly handsome man that I had known nearly my entire life. He was horrifically scarred.

His thick, chestnut hair was gone. Instead, his head was all puckered, burned skin, likely courtesy of my grenade.

His entire face looked like a barely healed burn, and if it weren't for those scorching whiskey eyes, I would have never been able to pick him out in a crowd.

I snorted.

"You look like shit." I grinned, and his eyes flashed with rage, but he didn't retaliate. He simply remained where he was, staring at me with a look that promised pain.

"You have been very, very bad, Callum." He finally said, his voice dripping with hatred.

I rolled my eyes. I wasn't afraid of him. If I died here, so be it. I was done bowing to him; he no longer controlled me.

Looking at him now, he was just a shell of the man he had been before. I no longer felt that pull to obey.

"I'm not afraid of you, Damian, so you can cut the fucking act."

"You're not afraid of me, Callum?" he whispered, and I met his gaze head-on, feeling the darkness I'd worked so hard to suppress take me over.

"No, Damian. I'm not afraid of you. You're nothing I haven't seen before. You're just another monster."

He narrowed his eyes at me and licked his scarred lips.

"Shouldn't you be afraid of monsters, Mr. Walker?" His voice was soft, dangerous.

Did he not realize that he was the one who had taught me how to hunt people like him?

I was the thing the monsters were afraid of.

I let out a dark laugh, holding his gaze.

"Have you forgotten, Damian?" I gave him a slow, murderous smile. "I'm a monster too." I looked him up and down, clocking all the ways I could kill him. Most of them didn't even require a weapon. "And I'm a much scarier monster than you."

This time. I would *watch* him die. I wouldn't leave his side until he took his last rattling breath and his heart stopped in his chest.

I would watch the fucking light leave his eyes.

A slow, deadly smile spread across Damian's face.

“Hmm,” he said, walking slowly toward me. He rested his palms on his knees and brought his hideous face close enough to mine that I could feel his breath dance across my lips.

“I wonder if Naomi would agree?” he purred, and my vision went *red*.

OceanofPDF.com

100



Vox Moretti

Alexa, play: Big Dawgs - Humankind, Kanu

I stopped the car a half mile out from Apex while we waited for our backup to arrive. Taking advantage of the downtime, I ran Ryan and Theo through some tactical hand signs. It was surprisingly easy to teach them, as apparently, Gavin's ghost was explaining everything to Ryan.

As much as the cynic in me wanted to reject the fact that Gavin's spirit was really here whispering in Ryan's ear, I couldn't deny the fact that it would be impossible for Ryan to fake this.

On top of that, Ryan was one of the straightest shooters I'd ever met. Why the fuck would he make this up?

I received an encrypted text from Logan informing me that he, Ronan, and Dakota were in position as I was packing my bag with extra ammo and my single remaining grenade.

Testing out Ryan and Theo's newfound knowledge, I used the signal to *move forward*.

Theo and Ryan immediately fell in step behind me, both of them matching my pace perfectly.

Pleased that they had taken the lesson seriously, I moved quickly through the woods. I used the natural landscape to cover us as much as possible.

Logan had done a quick sweep of the dark web to see if we could get an idea of Damian's forces and what we were up against.

It looked like he outbid us on one of the deals we already eliminated. If Logan was right, he had about ten guys with him, which was a pain in the ass but not impossible to overcome.

If it had been just me, it would have been a suicide mission.

But Damian didn't know about our recent alliance with Logan, Ronan, and Dakota. On top of that, Ryan and Theo were not complete novices. They were both excellent fighters, and Ryan now had surprisingly good aim with a handgun.

As long as the two of them listened to me, I had high hopes for this mission.

Which was a good thing because I refused to fail.

Seeing Naomi's stupid fucking gnome buckled in the back seat of that mangled G-Wagon made me feel things I hadn't felt in a long time.

Not since Gavin died.

I was not leaving here without her.

I would raze the entire planet before I left her to die here.

That tiny ray of sunshine with her stupid fucking sundresses and annoyingly positive outlook on life was not dying in the shit hole that had stolen my soul from me.

I'd already been to hell and back.

Nothing scared me anymore, least of all the devil and his band of hired men.

I'm coming, Naomi.

101



Ryan Fairview

Vox made the motion that meant *freeze*. Theo and I obeyed, waiting in silence as he checked his phone.

Peering over his shoulder, taking in the imposing concrete building from where we were still hidden in the treeline. Silence settled over the forest. Vox still wasn't saying anything, and I spotted some movement ahead, closer to the structure.

Then, sharp gunfire rang out. The sound of automatic gunfire echoed off the trees, making me duck down.

There was a split second of silence, and then a man's voice laughed, "I got four of them!"

"Ronan, get dow—"

More gunfire rang out, then returned fire. Once again, the forest fell into silence.

"Five! Jesus, pull your weight, freeloaders," the voice was triumphant.

"Is it clear?" another voice asked.

Silence. Then, "Clear."

Vox made the motion to move forward, and we followed him out of the tree line. Logan, Ronan, and Dakota were waiting for us in front of a large grey building, surrounded by a 10-foot-tall chain link fence wrapped in barbed wire.

The gate looked like it had been run through by a car, and the gravel-crusted ground was littered with the corpses of men in full tactical gear.

Ronan turned his manic eyes on us as we approached, and Logan gave us a suave grin.

"All yours, boys... and, girl?" Ronan eyed Theo up and down curiously, but Dakota elbowed him in the side.

"Behave," he muttered, but Ronan just chuckled.

"We'll cover you while you go in; make sure no one surprises you while you're in there," Logan said, and Vox gave him an appreciative nod. He glanced back at Theo and me, his lips pursing, and I knew he wanted to tell us to stay out here.

He was looking at Logan's team like he would prefer having them with him, which made sense, but I wasn't having it.

"I'm coming," I reminded Vox. "There's nothing you can do to stop me."

The thought of Cal potentially being tied up in a bathtub again was eating away at my mind. He would need me. I was confident I would be the only person that could make him feel safe again if we found him like that.

There was no way I was staying behind.

Vox saw the determination on my face and nodded, though the look he gave me was annoyed.

'I know that look,' Gavin said somberly. 'That's his 'You better not get killed, look.'

I snorted.

"I know. I've seen it before." I sighed.

Vox ignored my conversation with the invisible man, though Ronan looked intrigued.

Theo chuckled softly, but there was no time to relay what Gavin had said. Before I knew it, Vox was motioning for us to move forward, and we fell in line.

My heart rate kicked up a notch as we approached the foreboding concrete building that loomed before us.

I was about to storm the gates of fucking hell to save the man I loved.

I didn't care what it took once I had him back in my arms.

I would personally make sure Damian fucking Ryker wasn't around to take him from me again.

OceanofPDF.com

102



Ryan Fairview

We entered Apex, and the entrance was a disaster. It was clear these halls had suffered multiple explosions.

The ground was covered in rubble, and massive chunks were missing from several walls.

The rotting stench of decomposing flesh hit my nose the deeper Vox led us into the building, and I pulled my shirt up over my nose as we stepped over corpse after corpse.

'I was here when Cal killed all these guys. The man's a fucking legend.' Gavin whispered as we passed the devastation Cal had left in his first attempt to kill Damian.

'I'm going to go ahead and get a lay of the land; tell Vox to wait at the steps to the basement.'

I nodded and relayed the message to our leader. Gavin's spirit flickered out of existence, and we waited in a tense silence for him to return.

He wasn't gone long.

When he reappeared, his eyes had a tightness that hadn't been there when he left.

'There are four men down there. One is guarding the bottom of the stairs, and there are two holding Naomi's cell... the fourth one is in the cell with her.'

My blood ran cold at the way he said it. His blue eyes were bright and full of pain, and I knew without asking that we needed to hurry up. Something bad was happening to Naomi, and we needed to get to her before it was too late.

I relayed the message to Vox, and both Vox and Theo's pupils blew wide with rage when I mentioned that there was a man in the cell with Naomi.

Vox let out a slow breath, and I watched as all the life bled out of his face. I no longer felt like I was looking at a human being.

I was looking at a killing machine, and he would show no mercy.

Vox made the motion that meant *'cover me.'*

Theo and I flanked him as he pulled a small object out of his backpack. At first, I thought it was a grenade, but it wasn't egg-shaped. It was cylindrical. He tore a pin out of it and tossed it down the stairs.

'Smoke bomb, stay low; it'll rise to the ceiling. The lower you are, the easier it'll be for you to see and breathe.'

Vox confirmed what Gavin suggested with a 'get low' hand signal, and Theo and I crouched behind him, following him down the stairs.

I could hear Damian's men shout and mobilize as the smoke overtook the basement.

Doing my best to stay calm, I got so low I was nearly on my knees.

'Ginger dude! Against the wall!' Gavin hollered, and I threw myself to follow the order just as the deafening sound of gunshots began to explode around me.

A bullet whizzed so close to my head that I felt it pass. It hit the concrete wall behind me, and a chunk of debris sliced my cheek open as I did my best to plaster myself to the wall.

Suddenly, Vox's demand for me to stay behind didn't feel so infantilizing.

A few weeks of target practice did *not* mean I was ready for a full-blown shoot-out. Even Theo, as tough as she was, was clearly just as shell-shocked as I was. We kept as low as possible and hugged the wall, watching

through the film of smoke as two shadows engaged in what looked like hand-to-hand before us.

There was a grunt and the distinct sound of someone releasing their last breath before one of the shadows dropped the other shadow to the ground.

I cocked my gun in my hand and pointed it at the approaching figure in case it was Damian's man that had survived, but Gavin's voice assured me it was Vox.

The smoke was already thinning as he crouched by Theo and me.

He quickly checked us over to make sure we weren't injured, then made the motion for '*enemy down*,' followed by the signal that meant '*low crawl*.'

I glanced at Theo, and though her face was whiter than I'd ever seen it, she looked determined as I felt to continue.

Getting down to my stomach, I crawled under a cloud of smoke, following Vox as he did the same.

I swallowed as we passed the corpse of the man Vox had killed. The man's spirit was peeling itself away from his body, but Gavin descended on him, forcing the spirit to retreat away from us, for which I was grateful.

The last thing I needed was to be distracted by malevolent ghosts passing through my body while I tried to survive down here.

Vox abruptly made the motion to freeze, then motioned '*enemy spotted*.'

Sure enough, I could see the legs of the men Gavin said were guarding Naomi's door.

Silently, Vox ordered us to stay where we were. He crawled forward until he was nearly on top of the guards.

Ripping out a tactical knife, he stabbed it roughly through the back of the first man's ankle. The man screamed as Vox twisted the knife and sliced through his Achilles tendon.

His partner's shadow turned. I could only make out his silhouette through the smoke as he aimed low, clearly getting ready to shoot Vox.

"Ryan, stay down!" Theo shouted. Without warning, she basically crawled on top of me, forcing my head down.

I heard two deafening '*pops*' as Theo fired into the shadow of the man who was about to shoot Vox. The silhouette of the guard's head exploded in a spray of gore as Theo's bullets found their home in his skull.

By the time he hit the ground, Vox had eliminated the other man and was already on his feet.

He shot out the handle in the door and kicked it open. Vox didn't wait for any of us before barrelling into the room. The door slammed shut behind him, and instead of gunshots, our ears were greeted by the bone-chilling sound of a grown man's screams.

I moved to follow, but Gavin reappeared and shook his head.

'Just wait. I don't think Gnomes is going to want many people to see her like this.' Gavin said, his gaze sad.

I swallowed but nodded, repeating the message to Theo.

Theo was gripping her gun so hard she was shaking. Without taking her eyes off the man she had killed, she asked, "There's a man in there with her. Shouldn't we make sure Vox is ok?"

Gavin gave us a dark look and shook his head.

'Trust me. That man was dead the second he touched Naomi.'

OceanofPDF.com

103



Vox Moretti

Alexa, play: nameless - Stevie Howie

H *e was on top of her.*

Rage like I had never felt in my *life* roared through me as my mind processed what I was seeing.

A fucking gorilla of a man was holding Naomi down on a dirty cot. He had his hand buried under her sundress, and the way he was thrusting his fingers in and out of her broke something in my mind.

I was a dangerous person. I knew that.

But I was always in *control*.

Watching this man violate Naomi... *sweet, fiery, funny Naomi...*

Every ounce of control I'd ever had shattered into a thousand splinter-like pieces.

The man was practically mauling her face as she struggled to kick away from him, and he tore his mouth away from hers as I entered. His black

eyes widened at my sudden appearance.

For the first time in my life, I wished my mouth could still form words because I wanted to tell him I was going to *cut his fucking cock off*.

Naomi whimpered, and the sound stoked the flames of fury that were already wreaking havoc on my black heart.

I don't remember moving.

Suddenly, the man was beneath me. My fist connected with his face, and his cheekbone shattered. He cried out, begging me to stop after the fourth or fifth punch. One of my knuckles split open as his teeth caved in, and I relished in the satisfying *crunch* as my fist crushed the bridge of his nose. He was screaming now, asking me questions that I didn't have the ability or the desire to answer.

I'd been voiceless by choice since I was six years old.

Today I was also blind and fucking deaf.

I was deaf to his pathetic, *meaningless* apologies.

I was blind to the way his face broke apart beneath my hands.

I refused to listen to his pleas to spare his life or acknowledge the wreckage I was unleashing on his face.

My knuckles began to break, but I couldn't stop. I continued to rain blow after blow down on him.

Over and over again, I hit him until he was an unrecognizable puddle of gore.

His head turned into chunky, black and red biomatter as I beat him well past the point of death.

It took me longer than it should have to realize that he wasn't screaming anymore. The only sounds that filled the room now were Naomi's sobs mixed with the wet sound of my fists hitting what was left of her abuser's face.

Naomi hiccuped, and that, of all things, was what pulled me out of the all-consuming rage that had possessed me.

With a tremendous amount of effort, I forced myself to stop beating the dead man and got to my feet.

I turned to find Naomi curled up on her side, her bruised and battered face buried in her hands as she sobbed.

Her sundress was still pushed up to her waist, and she didn't have underwear on.

There was no way she left the fucking house today without panties on. Someone had removed them, and the thought of that made me want to kill the man a second time.

I shook my head, resolving that taking care of Naomi was more important than continuing to beat the shit out of someone who was already dead.

Slowly, I approached the cot and got to my knees next to her.

Being as gentle as I could, I tugged down her dress, covering her back up. She froze and peered through her fingers at me with terrified eyes.

The look on her face *wrecked me*.

Her bruised, tear-stained face hurt me so fucking badly that I felt like my heart would give out.

I wished I could say something to her to take that look away, but when I opened my mouth, nothing came out.

“Vox?” she whispered, and I nodded at her dumbly, reaching forward to take one of her hands in mine. My hands were covered in blood, but neither of us seemed to care.

I gave her what I hoped was a reassuring smile and nodded, reaching forward to gently brush away one of her tears, leaving a smudge of red on her swollen cheek.

Yeah, sweet girl. I’m here. I’ve got you.

“He said... he said he was going to ‘*test me before they sold me.*’” She barely got the words out before she broke down again, and I pulled her into my chest, wrapping her up tightly in my arms.

I shook my head against her, hoping like hell she could read my mind the way she always seemed to do.

That’s never going to happen, sweet girl. No one’s selling you. No one’s taking you from me. He’s dead. I’ll kill them all, beautiful. No one will ever fucking touch you again. You’re safe now.

She cried into my shoulder, and I reached behind her and grabbed the thin, ratty blanket off the cot. I wrapped her up in it, hoping she would feel better if she had something to hide in.

She shook in my arms as I stood, cradling her against me. I dropped a kiss on her forehead, being as gentle as possible.

She was a mess.

There was dried blood under her nose, and her face was so bruised and battered from the car accident that I worried even the lightest touches hurt.

It made me even more disgusted with that fucking *rapist* for having his mouth on her.

She was so hurt and broken. I just wanted to keep her somewhere soft and safe until she was feeling well enough to cuss me out again.

I'd never seen Naomi cry, and now that I had, I never wanted to see her cry again.

"I want to go home," she whispered, and my heart cracked in my chest.

I nodded.

That's exactly where we're going, sweet girl.

Again, I was hit with a wave of frustration that I couldn't say the words to her. So, I settled with squeezing her tighter against me, hoping she knew that I would do everything within my power to get her somewhere she felt safe.

OceanofPDF.com

104



Ryan Fairview

Vox came back out with Naomi in his arms. She was sobbing softly, and she had her face buried in his neck.

The anger and the horror that had already made a home in my chest ignited at the thought of sweet little Gnomes in such bad shape.

I met Vox's eyes and immediately knew that whatever had happened in that room was bad. We'd been too late to spare Naomi any additional trauma.

Now was not the time to ask what happened, so I kept my mouth shut and glanced at Gavin.

'He killed the guard inside. There's only one more guard covering the room Cal's in. I don't think Damian believed you would make it this far.'

I relayed this to Vox and Theo, and they exchanged a glance.

"I can take Naomi to the car; you go with Ryan," Theo said.

To my surprise, Vox shook his head and held Naomi tighter to his chest. I frowned.

"You want to take Naomi to the car? What about Cal?"

Vox gave me a pained look, and my heart stuttered in my chest in panic. He couldn't abandon the mission now. We had to fucking save Cal.

'I don't think he wants to leave Gnomes. It was bad in there, Ryan. She needs to feel safe right now. Vox is the most qualified person here to protect her.'

"Yeah, but he's also the most qualified guy to save fucking Cal!" I shouted, and I could see the indecision in Vox's eyes.

He didn't know what to do.

Prioritize his best friend? Or get his best friend's little sister to safety?

I knew what Cal would want him to do, but I couldn't accept it. I couldn't leave Cal here, not even for Naomi.

"We'll get him out, Ryan. Let Vox get Naomi to the car. Vox, send in the boys as backup." Theo turned to look at me, her knuckles cracking as she clutched her gun. "We've got this. It's just one dude. There are two of us. We're armed, and both of us know how to fight. Plus, you have your ghost friend who can scout the hall ahead of us."

"Yeah, but you forget, Cal is fucking haunted by his psycho mother. He doesn't have his talisman on him. I'm going to be distracted as fuck!" I snarled, and Theo bit her lip.

'Let me deal with Cal's mom. Some of the spirits haunting him are cool. I've been wandering around Apex since Damian murdered me here. I don't think my spirit can move on until I see Vox and Cal safe, so I've had a lot of time to get to know his ghouls. I think I can get some of them to help me hold her back while you focus on freeing him.'

This was interesting.

"Really? So if we kill Damian, you can move on?"

Gavin shrugged. *'It's just a theory.'*

"Do you think there's a way to get rid of his fucked up mom? Like, can we banish her to Hell or something?"

Gavin's eyes flashed, and a smile curled on his lips.

'I actually might know a guy. I met a chaos demon shortly after I died. Funny guy. Kind of a dick, but I guess that's to be expected, considering he's a demon and all. Maybe I can summon him to collect Cal's ghouls once we get rid of Damian? I assume we'll want to get rid of that asshole's spirit once he's dead, too.'

Not too sure how I felt about summoning a fucking demon. I was still mulling over Gavin's idea when Theo piped up.

“Don’t you have a grenade in your backpack?” she asked Vox, and he nodded. Theo shot him a devilish grin.

“Cool. Hand it over. I’ll blow up the jerk off guarding Cal’s door while you get Naomi to safety. Ryan’s ghost buddy can handle Cal’s ghouls while we free him. Cal can kill Damian, then we can all fucking go home.”

Vox gave Theo a smirk and nodded again, turning so Theo could dig through his bag for the grenade.

“You know how to use one of those?” I asked as Theo held up the black, egg-shaped explosive.

Her eyes were shining with excitement, and she shrugged.

“How hard can it be?”

OceanofPDF.com

105



Cal Walker

I was tearing against the ropes that Damian had used to tie me down so hard I could feel blood pooling in my palms.

“If you fucking touch Naomi I will fucking bathe in your blood!”

The shit I was screaming at him was getting increasingly more violent as I tore through my own skin and flesh in an attempt to get free.

Damian chuckled at my attempts to release myself from the chair as he prepped what looked like another needle.

“I’m going to rip your spine out of your fucking throat!” I roared as Damian flicked the syringe to distill any air bubbles.

“You’re going to do *none* of that, Callum. You’re going to sit still, and I’m going to have my fill of you. Then, when I’m done, I will kill you. Just as I should have done the day I found you in that fucking precinct.”

He came forward and fisted my hair, jerking my head to the side to expose the veins in my neck.

“Get the fuck away from me!”

“Shh, shh. This will help you calm down. Don’t worry. You’ll still be able to feel everything. It’s no fun if you don’t come while I fuck you.”

“Damian, I will literally bite your fucking dick off!”

As he looked down at me with those hungry whiskey eyes, more repressed memories seemed to wiggle free from the depths of my mind. I couldn’t believe I had buried them so deep.

He had always been a fucking child abuser. My mind had tried to protect me from it, but I hated myself for being so weak. All the times he had touched himself while he had me tortured as a child. Sometimes he had touched me too, and I had fucking *repressed it*.

If I’d remembered, would it have taken me so long to break free of him? How the fuck could my mind betray me like that!?

“I’m going to fuck you raw, Callum. We’re going to go *again and again*. I’m going to make you *beg* for it. Then I’m going to sell little Naomi into the trade you tried so hard to dismantle. I’ll let you watch the auction. Tight little pussy like hers will fetch a pretty penny. Then, once she’s gone and you’re mine again, I’ll slit your throat and watch you die. Maybe in front of her, just so she knows for sure her big brother isn’t coming to save her.”

“Why are you *doing* this!?” I snarled, though I knew it was a stupid fucking question. There was no rhyme or reason for Damian’s sadism.

Some men just wanted to hurt people.

Some men fucking got off on it.

I knew this because I was one of them.

The difference between Damian and me was that I didn’t *want* to be like this. I didn’t take *pride* in the fact that I was a monster.

Damian loved himself, which I supposed was lucky for him, considering no one else ever would.

“Why am I doing this? LOOK AT MY FACE!” he roared, positioning the tip of the needle against my throat. “Look what you fucking did to me! Did you really think I would let this go unpunished!?”

I scowled. “No. I thought you would fucking *die*! Jesus Christ, you’re like a fucking *cockroach*! At least now you look like one, too.”

I spat on him, and his face went purple with fury.

He reared back, pulling back the needle as he readied himself to plunge it into my neck.

Suddenly, there was an *explosion*.

The entire room shook, and dust rained down from the concrete walls. The steel door to the room he had me locked in blew inward, and Damian and I both stared in shock as Ryan Fairview stepped into the frame.

Theo appeared behind him, and they both looked ready for fucking war.

OceanofPDF.com

106



Cal Walker

Alexa, play: Glass Houses - Bad Omens

Ryan didn't even look at me; he only had eyes for Damian. The dust from the explosion billowed in the room from behind, and he sighted down his arm. Almost casually, my little, innocent ginger snap fired a shot.

Holy shit, that was hot... Why was that so hot?!

The bullet caught Damian in the shoulder, but the fucker had learned from his mistakes.

Bitch was obviously wearing a vest under his shirt.

Still, getting shot with a vest on will wind even the toughest guys, and Damian was no exception. He stumbled back, shouting out in alarm as Ryan stalked toward him.

Ryan had a look on his face I had never seen before. His eyes were blank, and his face was white with rage. Even his freckles were pale.

Suddenly, he winced, and his attention became divided by something I couldn't see.

Fuck. I'd dropped my talisman.

I swear to god, if my bitch ass mother was attacking him...

"Free Cal! I'll deal with this fucker," Theo shouted, darting past her brother toward Damian.

Damian was still trying to recover from being shot when Theo executed one of the most elegant roundhouse kicks I'd ever seen in my fucking life.

Her foot connected with the side of Damian's head, and he went flying. My mouth dropped open as I watched Theo descend upon him again.

I knew Theo fought in underground rings, but *knowing* something and *seeing* it were two different things.

Her fighting style was incredibly unique. It was an elegant mix of Krav Maga and Judo, which gave her an edge against someone Damian's size.

She was fast and evasive but ruthlessly efficient when executing offensive moves. She wasn't aiming to just injure. She was aiming to *maim*.

Despite how good Theo was, she was much smaller than Damian, so it was still high stakes. She would be in serious trouble if he even landed *one* hit on her. Her clear Judo background allowed her to use his size and momentum against him, but she could tire and possibly make a mistake unless she knocked him out soon.

I needed to get out of this fucking chair before that happened.

Ryan was suddenly on me, working on the ropes that bound me to the chair.

"Baby, I can't believe you're here!?! Where's Vox?" As happy as I was to see my ginger snap, I hadn't expected him to be the one to bust through that door. Where was my vampy bestie?

"Vox has Naomi; he's getting her to the car," Ryan grunted as he ripped one of the knots on my wrists loose. Relief rushed through me.

Fucking Damian.

Getting me all worked up for nothing.

I should have known Vox would never let anything happen to Gnomes.

"*Fuck*," Ryan rasped, sounding like he was in pain.

I glanced over my shoulder at him, frowning as he shuddered.

"What is it?"

"Your fucking mom. God, she's a cunt. I'm glad Cass killed her," he grumbled, and I scowled.

I *hated* that she was able to hurt him. And I hated even more that there was nothing I could do about it.

As soon as my arms came free, pain shot through my shoulder. I'd forgotten I'd injured it in the car accident, and I swore softly under my breath.

Ah well. I only needed one arm to use a gun. Doing my best to ignore the screaming pain in my shoulder, I bent down to undo my left ankle while Ryan worked on my right.

"Baby, I can't fucking believe you're the one getting me out of this mess. How did you even manage this?" I asked, sliding the rough rope out of the chokehold it had on my leg. My brave, brave ginger snap... he was wearing fucking Kevlar, for Christ's sake!

Fuck me sideways.

I was going to marry the shit out of this man.

"A lot of help from a lot of unlikely people. Your friend Gavin... His spirit is here. He's helping wrangle your mom. Also, Logan, Ronan, and Dakota helped us get in."

My eyebrows raised in surprise at that. Holy shit.

What?

Gavin was here?

I didn't have time to ask any more questions, however, as there was a crack and scream.

Both Ryan and I looked up to find that Damian had finally landed a hit on Theo. She went down, and he leapt on top of her, jabbing that fucking needle in her neck and slamming down the plunger.

"You fucking *bitch!*" Damian roared, and Theo's body almost immediately went limp as her bloodstream filled with whatever it was Damian had put in the syringe.

He tossed the needle aside and pulled a switchblade out of his pocket.

"Theo!" Ryan screamed, just as I finally managed to leap up from the chair. I launched myself across the room and was on Damian just as he plunged the knife deep into Theo's side.

She let out a choked moan, working against whatever was in her system to try to get away from Damian.

She was wearing a Kevlar vest, but Kevlar wasn't designed to prevent stab wounds. When Damian ripped the knife out of her, red blood poured onto the concrete floor.

He went to stab her again, but I was quicker. With my good arm, I ripped him off my future sister-in-law and tossed him across the room.

His head hit the concrete wall so hard there was a satisfying *crack*. He slid to the floor, and I rushed to Theo's side.

"Don't worry about me!" she slurred, clumsily holding her hand to the wound in her side. "Kill that fucking dick!"

I glanced down at her side. There was less blood than I had expected, which was good. It meant he likely hadn't hit an artery.

"Try not to move," I instructed her, and she blinked at me, a sloppy chuckle tumbling out of her lips.

"No problemmss therree. I feelll lllllike myyy boody iz made uvv sannnd."

"Fuck. We'll get you a doctor; just hold on."

I spun around and stalked toward Damian. He was struggling to get up, and my gaze clocked his hand sliding to draw the gun he had strapped to his hip.

Without blinking, I cracked him across the face *hard*, and he went back down. I ripped the handgun away from him and pressed it to his forehead, a vicious snarl on my lips.

He looked up at me, his horrifically scarred face now even more bruised and bloody. I waited for the dopamine I usually felt over a good kill to wash over me... but I felt nothing.

The thought of killing him didn't make me happy.

I was *sick* of killing people. I had never wanted to be like this in the first place. This man had *raped* me, mind, body and soul.

I'd already killed him once. It felt cosmically unfair that I was being forced to do it a second time.

Looking into his whiskey eyes, I was suddenly overcome with an unexpected rush of sorrow, not for his impending death, but for *myself*.

I was suddenly *so fucking sad* for the little version of me that had fallen prey to this man.

I was so sad for the adult version of me that I'd grown into.

In that moment, as I stared into Damian's eyes with my finger on the trigger, I mourned the pieces of my soul I'd sacrificed with each kill I'd been forced to make.

"I hate you for making me this way," I told him. My voice cracked on the words.

It felt like we were suspended in time, and for once, he didn't have anything to say back to me. He knew he was going to die and that I was going to be the one to kill him.

I just wished I didn't fucking have to be.

"Angel," Ryan said softly, coming up to stand beside me. I glanced at him, and he frowned.

Ryan's eyes darted from my face, which was now somehow wet with tears, down to my hand, which was holding the gun directly against Damian's forehead.

It was trembling.

"Angel. Do you *want* to kill him? Tell me the truth," Ryan whispered.

I closed my eyes and exhaled, tonguing my lip ring in agitation.

"No, ginger snap. I don't want to kill him. I don't want to kill *anybody*. But I have to."

Ryan reached out and brushed a tear off my cheek, meeting my gaze head-on.

"You don't have to do anything you don't want to do, angel," he whispered. "Give me the gun."

"Baby, I *have* to kill him."

"No, you don't, angel. This isn't who you are anymore. Give me the gun, Callum," he repeated, his eyes never leaving mine.

Reluctantly, I handed him the Glock, even as more protests began tumbling from my mouth.

"I can't let him live, Ryan. We'll never be safe as long as he's alive."

Ryan took the gun from me and brushed another tear off my cheek with his free hand.

"Oh, angel. I never said anything about letting him live." Without looking away from me, Ryan pointed the gun directly at Damian's head and pulled the trigger.

The deafening *BANG!* of the gunshot was lost on me. I barely even felt it as blood and brain matter splattered across both of our faces.

My mouth dropped open in shock.

Ryan didn't smile. He looked so serious, and there was a cold satisfaction in his gaze that I'd never seen before.

"All I said was *you* didn't have to be the one to kill him, angel."

He rose up on his toes and brushed a delicate kiss against my lips.

"Now... Let's get you home."

OceanofPDF.com

107



Ryan Fairview

You would think killing a man would bother me.
It didn't.
All I felt was fucking *relief*.

If I didn't see Damian die with my own two eyes, I think I would have lived the rest of my life looking over my shoulder. For me to have fully believed with my whole soul that the man was dead, just for him to kidnap and hurt two people that now meant so much to me...

It was disgustingly easy for me to pull that trigger. Maybe I would feel differently later after some time had passed and I had time to process everything that happened, but I would cross the bridge when I got to it.

Theo was not in good shape by the time Logan, Ronan, and Dakota found us. She was conscious, but whatever Damian had injected her with had taken away all mobility. She was basically a rag doll.

The stab wound in her side, though deep, was already clotting. I was texting her condition to Dr. Callahan as Logan and Ronan helped Theo up while Dakota got to work dealing with Damian's body.

TOM CALLAHAN:

Try not to move her more than necessary. If there's minimal bruising, we might be in luck. Take her to this address instead of Fairview if you can. I'll be better equipped to check for any organ damage.

RYAN:

Done. Again, I can't thank you enough. I owe you one.

TOM CALLAHAN:

Haha. Well, if I ever need someone to take care of a body, I know who to call. *winking emoji*

I passed the address on to Ronan, and they offered to take Theo in their car, as there wouldn't be room for all of us in Vox's Aston Martin.

"Theo, I'll grab the hearse and swing by after we take Naomi home," I assured my sister. Her head was lolling on her shoulders, but her dark eyes were full of fire.

"I'mmmm finneeee."

"You don't look fine, muscles," Cal said, giving her an uncharacteristically stern look. I could see how worried he was. He affectionately tucked a stray piece of hair behind her ear and gave her a little smirk.

"You're a fucking badass, you know that?" he asked softly, and her lips quivered as she tried to return the smirk.

"Makkkee surre, yeww....Tellll...urrr...sisstteerrrrr."

He barked out a laugh as the boys carted her away, Dakota tailing them with Damian's corpse slung over his shoulder.

Cal turned to face me with a big smile on his face.

"So, you wanna get out of this shit hole?" he asked, and I smirked at him.

"In a minute, angel. First, I want to see if Gavin can help us out with your little... problem."

Cal made a face. "Don't say it like that. People are going to think I can't get it up."

I burst out laughing just as Gavin's spirit materialized next to me.

"Trust me, angel. No one would ever accuse you of that." I chuckled. Gavin glanced back and forth between us, grinning.

'What I miss?' he asked, and I shrugged.

"Just Cal being Cal."

Gavin gave me a sad smile and nodded. *‘Can you tell him that I miss him?’*

I nodded and relayed the message. Cal looked like he might actually start crying.

“Thank you for helping Ryan and Vox get to us, Gav. I’m so sorry I wasn’t able to protect you from Damian.” He was looking in Gavin’s general direction, though you could tell he couldn’t see him at all.

‘It’s not your fault, Cal. There was nothing you could have done. I’m just so glad you and Vox are free now.’

Cal glanced around the concrete room, frowning.

“Is my mother here?”

I nodded.

During the tussle with Damian, she had been relentless. She passed through me twice. Once, when I’d been trying to shoot Damian, and a second time, when I’d been trying to untie Cal. However, the woman that Damian had shot in the face when Cal was a child had come to help.

She was able to convince the other ghouls that if they let go of their anger at Cal, they would all have a chance to move on.

The only spirit that hadn’t listened was his mother. She was currently being restrained by two ghosts who seemed desperate to finally be freed from haunting Cal. They’d also made quick work of Damian, though he wasn’t much of a problem.

Because I’d literally blown his face off, his spirit couldn’t see or talk. All it could do was make nasty gurgling noises, which gave me a sick sense of satisfaction.

Gavin had disappeared for a while, informing me he was going to see if he could figure out how to summon the chaos demon he’d told me about earlier.

The room was crowded with ghosts, waiting to see if this demon Gavin had a connection with would be able to tell them how to escape this plane and move onto the next stage of death. I was hoping like crazy this would work. I didn’t need this many spirits pissed off with us without a talisman in sight.

Suddenly, the air around us dropped in temperature, and I instinctively moved closer to Cal as the shadows in the room seemed to come to life.

“What the *fuck!*” Cal exclaimed, grabbing me by the wrist and jerking me into him. We both stared in a cross between horror and fascination as the

shadows shifted into the shape of smokey cats. Their eyes glowed red, and they yowled and hissed as they corralled the spirits into a corner.

In the middle of the room, what appeared to be an attractive man with dark hair and tawny skin manifested. He was wearing black pants and a crisp black button-up shirt rolled to his elbows.

He ran a hand through his mop of ebony hair, flashing a block of script tattooed on the inside of his forearm.

“Ugh. Where are we..? Ohio? You failed to mention you would be summoning me to the literal *armpit* of the United States,” the demon grumbled, his green eyes flashing with annoyance in the dim light.

How did I know it was a demon, you ask? Outside of the fact that he literally melted into existence out of the ground, I could just tell. This being was *ancient* and immortal as fuck. He was not something I wanted to piss off or fuck around with.

Gavin just chuckled and shrugged. ‘*Come on, everyone knows that the real armpit of the US is Florida.*’

Just then, another demon manifested. This one was equally striking, though he had auburn hair and ivory skin.

“I don’t know; have either of you been to Louisiana? I feel like I’m torturing a new soul from Monroe at least once a week.” This new demon mused, and his dark-haired counterpart smirked.

“Come now, little bird. You’re going to miss all the torture once we get to Salem.”

The demon with the rust-colored hair sighed wistfully, giving his companion a suggestive look.

“I’m sure we’ll find things to keep us busy.”

Cal’s hand was gripping my wrist so hard it hurt.

“You’re seeing this too, right? These two dudes just...*appeared!*” He was speaking out of the corner of his mouth, clearly trying to go unnoticed by the two demonic entities.

I nodded. “Yeah, Gavin called them. I think he said they could take away the spirits that are haunting you,” I whispered back.

The dark-haired demon’s eyes snapped to mine, and his grin widened.

“No need to whisper, Ryan Fairview. We can hear you just fine,” he purred. “Your boyfriend here has a dirty mind. You should see the things he wants to do to you. It’s making me hard just thinking about it.”

Cal snarled and stepped in front of me. "Watch it," he rumbled, but the demon just chuckled and rolled his eyes.

"Relax. I don't fuck humans...often. I have my hands full with my little bird at the moment, so your ginger snap is safe."

'Not to interrupt this cute little moment,' Gavin interrupted, clearly trying to keep Cal from getting himself dragged to hell. *'But are you really able to help these souls move on?'* He asked.

The chaos demon nodded, that evil smirk still playing on his lips.

"Oh yes. Some of you will be reincarnated," he said, turning to face the crowd of spirits that were now cowering before his colony of shadowy hellcats.

The demon's green eyes landed on Cal's mother, and his grin widened.

"And some of you... will *not*."

Cal's mother screamed and ripped away from the two spirits holding her back, the massive gash in her neck gushing phantom blood. My eyes widened, but the hellcats descended on her, pinning her to the ground.

"You're a demon, Callum! You're a cursed, filthy evil thing!"

Rage flared through me at her words, and I was very glad Cal couldn't hear her. I knew how much being called those things triggered him. I wanted to hurt this evil woman. How could she say those things to her own son?

How had she said them to a little boy?

Happily, I didn't need to worry as the dark-haired demon stepped forward, glaring down at Cal's mom with a very scary look on his face.

"You think *he's* a demon?" the creature purred, bending at the waist to get on the spirit's level. "You poor, *wretched* thing. You're about to learn what a real demon is, and you're not going to like it."

The auburn-haired demon smirked, glancing at the other spirits. "The king of Hell is not happy with you," he mused, speaking to Cal's manic mother. "He doesn't take kindly to souls that convince others to stay behind when summoned. All these souls are late for judgment. If they begin to fester, our Queen will be upset... and trust me. No one wants that."

Cal's mom began babbling. What sounded like a manic version of the 'Our Father' spilled out of her lips, and both the demons laughed.

"Your god won't save you." The rust-haired creature chuckled.

"He's a little... *tied up*." The chaos demon snapped his fingers, and the hellcats sprang forward, clawing and biting at the spirits, before dragging

them screaming into the underworld.

Cal and I were staring with our mouths hanging open. I wanted so badly to ask if he could see the hellcats too, but now didn't seem like a good time.

Gavin was frowning.

'You're taking all of us to Hell? Some of those spirits were good people.'

The chaos demon gave him a bored look and shrugged.

"For now. Like I said. Some of you will be reincarnated. The ones that our Queen decides are too rotten to be remade will be tormented."

Cal's hand shot into the air like he was a middle schooler with a question.

The demon quirked an amused brow.

"Yes, Callum?"

"Can you torment my mom? *Puh-lease!?*"

I elbowed him in the ribs.

"Don't ask a favor from a demonic entity, Callum! What the fuck!"

Cal glanced at me, his face going white, but the demon chuckled.

"Relax. I planned on tormenting her anyway... and neither of you have anything I particularly want or need. You're safe from accidental deals with the devil... *This time.*" The malevolent being's green eyes flashed, and his tone darkened. "But your boyfriend is right, Callum Walker. It's not typically a good idea to make deals with demons."

"I can confirm," the auburn-haired creature said, shooting an amused look at his partner. "I made that mistake, and now I'm bound to serve this asshole for eternity."

The chaos demon snatched up his chin, and a terrifying growl rumbled through the room. Tension crackled between them as we watched them stare at each other from inches away.

"Don't act like you don't like it, little bird. You love it when I put you on your knees."

Cal leaned in close to me again and whispered into my ear.

"This is super hot," he muttered, and his words seemed to break the spell between the two demons.

The being with the green eyes sighed and released his partner's face before turning back to face us.

"Come on, Gavin. Let's get you reassigned. Say goodbye to your friends," he said, and Gavin nodded.

He reached out and brushed his fingers against Cal's cheek. Cal jumped, and his eyes widened.

"Was that Gavin!? I think I felt something!"

I nodded. "Yeah, it's him. He wants to say goodbye."

Cal reached his hand out, and I watched their fingers brush against each other. My throat tightened at the look of longing on both of their faces.

"Bye, Gav," Cal whispered, his voice cracking.

'Bye, Cal,' his friend replied, his voice equally strained. The spirit glanced at me, his eyes glistening with tears. *'Can you tell him I love him? And what happened to me isn't his fault. And can you tell Vox I miss him every day, but he needs to move on and let himself be happy now?'*

I relayed his message and nodded, starting to feel a little choked up myself.

Gavin gave me a sad smile and a cold, ghostly hug before stepping back to join the two demons waiting for him.

'Take care of him, ginger man. He's special,' Gavin said, nodding his head toward Cal.

"I will," I croaked, taking Cal's hand in mine as I watched the shadows twist around Gavin's spirit.

I blinked, and suddenly, all three of them were gone.

Cal squeezed my hand as I shuddered, feeling both somehow sad but also relieved.

"It's done," I said, glancing up at the man I loved more than life itself. "You're officially a free man. The demons from your past can't hurt you anymore, angel."

Cal smiled down at me and brushed a kiss across my lips.

"You saved me, baby. In every possible sense, you saved me."

I choked on a sob and wrapped my arms around him, holding him close to me and just appreciating the fact that we were both together, and we were both alive.

EPILOGUE 1



Cal Walker

Alexa, play: Addicted to you - Avicci

Thank fucking *Christ*, my collarbone wasn't broken like I originally thought. My shoulder had just been dislocated.

After we left Apex, we piled into Vox's Aston Martin. He made Ryan drive as he refused to get out of the back seat where he'd nestled Naomi next to Mr. Grumble. I offered to do it, but Ryan said until I got my arm looked at, I was stuck back in healing mode.

I fucking hated healing mode.

Hopefully, now that Damian was dead for real, this would be the last time Ryan ever felt the need to baby me like this.

Despite my annoyance, I managed not to complain about it. The second my gaze fell on Naomi, I suddenly felt light as a feather.

However, I noticed the skin around Vox's mouth was tighter than normal, and he seemed to be having a hard time tearing his gaze away from

her sleeping form.

It was such a relief to see her in one piece. The memory of being trapped in that car wreck, screaming her name, and thinking she might be dead was the stuff of fucking nightmares.

I wasn't looking forward to adding that particular memory to my midnight collection of brain horrors. It was way worse than the dreams of Damian sexually assaulting me, which I seemed to be having more and more frequently now that the memories had been uncovered.

My therapist assured me that was normal and that when you work on overcoming trauma like this, things often got worse before they got better.

Ryan told me Vox had needed to kill a man who was in the room with Gnomes when they saved her, but neither of them would tell any of us what happened.

Vox was back to his usual uncommunicative self, and Naomi just seemed to want to leave the past behind her.

She bounced back pretty quickly after everything that went down. Vox tended to get grumpier than normal whenever one of us pressed her to open up, and she smoothly changed the subject... though maybe I was just imagining it. He seemed grumpier than normal about everything concerning Naomi. He didn't seem to like the idea of her going away to school in the fall either, so what the fuck did I know.

Dr. Callahan informed us that her nose had been broken from the airbag, and she understandably hated having her face taped up for a few weeks. However, after that, she returned to her usual bubbly and chipper self.

The only thing that changed was her outfits. I noticed she didn't seem to ever wear her sundresses anymore. Now, she tended to favor tight black pants and stylish long-sleeved turtlenecks.

When I asked her why she'd undergone such a drastic change in style, she just laughed and rolled her eyes.

"I'm going to *art* school, Callum. I need to be taken seriously. *Duh.*"

I didn't get it, but whatever. If it made her happy, it made me happy.

Theo also made a full recovery. Dr. Callahan said she was *extremely* lucky. Damian's knife had missed her spleen by only a few centimeters.

Naomi asked about Theo in the group chat, and to our surprise, Cass exploded into Dr. Callahan's office shortly after, demanding to see her.

Theo, who was still a little loopy from the drugs Damian had injected her with, gave Cass one of the smuggest smirks I had ever seen on her face.

“Worried about me, princess?” she slurred, and Cass’s entire face went beat red.

“In your *dreams*, muscle shirt! I’m here to check on my brother!”

Theo snickered and rolled her eyes. “Sure, baby girl. We all know you’ve got it bad for me.”

Her eyes fluttered closed, and she winced slightly as she lay back down on the surgical cot Dr. Callahan had set up for her.

Cass tried to hide it, but I saw the concern that flashed across my sister’s face as the energy seemed to fade out of Theo’s body.

Cass scowled down at Ryan’s sister in the way she sometimes scowled at me when I was doing something stupid.

“I’m going to be fucking pissed if you die, Theodora. Cal and Naomi are attached to you now, and I don’t have the time to pick up the pieces if they fall apart.”

Without opening her eyes, Theo chuckled again.

“I love it... when you say my name like that, princess.” She sighed before her breathing evened out, and she slipped into a well-deserved slumber.

I pretended not to notice when Cass slipped her fingers into Theo’s hand and squeezed.

She stayed with Theo long after we all went home.

That was two weeks ago, and now I was finally enjoying the full use of my arm again.

Dr. Callahan had come by earlier to remove my sling, and I had plans to take full advantage of my newly acquired clean bill of health.

I was waiting for Ryan to come to bed when his deep, sexy voice floated up the stairs.

“Angel! Were you able to pick up those signs for Mr. Stein’s service tomorrow?”

I chuckled. “Yes, baby. They’re set up in the viewing room. Come up here. I want to show you something!”

Ryan jogged up the stairs and appeared in the doorway, looking as hot as the day I’d met him. I couldn’t help but smile.

“What’s up?” he asked, tugging the knot of his tie loose. He stalked over to where I was sitting on the end of the bed, and I allowed my gaze to roam over him.

Fuck, he looked good.

“Check it out,” I said, holding up my sling-free hand and wiggling my fingers. “Back in action, baby.”

Ryan’s smile was so gorgeous; I was sure someone more talented than me could write a whole fucking song about it.

Though... the thought of someone writing a song about him made me fucking homicidal. So much so that I needed to shake the thought away and remind myself it wasn’t real.

No one was actually trying to write songs about him. He was mine. He would always *be* mine.

“*Amazing.*” He beamed, pulling my hand up to his mouth and leaving a gentle kiss on the tip of each finger.

“You know what that means?” I grinned, and he raised an eyebrow.

“Tell me.”

“It means we need to test it out. Make sure everything’s working properly.”

His gaze immediately darkened, and I felt my cock throb between my legs at the sight.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.”

He swallowed, and I stood up, steering him around to take my place on the edge of the bed.

“Take your pants off, beautiful. Let me see that big, sexy cock.”



I HELPED RYAN UNDRESS AND HAD HIM LIE ON HIS BACK IN MY FAVORITE position... With his legs bent and his ass fully exposed.

Ryan struggled with negative self-esteem because of all the bullying he had endured as a child, and I’d been working on building him up in our day-to-day. It seemed to have been helping, but I *loved* forcing him to build himself up during sex.

Pushing him out of his comfort zone and using his pleasure as a reward for complimenting himself was one of my new favorite games since that time I fucked him in front of the mirror in IKEA.

It was uncomfortable for him to do, which satisfied my sadistic needs while also forcing my man to see himself the way I did.

Crawling onto the bed and looking down at him, I took a moment to appreciate the way his chest was already rapidly rising and falling as he panted in anticipation.

“You look so pretty like this, all spread open and waiting.”

“Cal...”

It'd been a few days since we'd last fucked, and it was clear he needed to come. He wasn't allowed to come anymore without my permission. I'd told him that when he tried to tell me we wouldn't be fucking again until my arm healed.

Once I took masturbation off the table, his resolve evaporated fairly quickly. We still toned it down from the daily pounding I would have loved to subject him to, but still. I'd take what I could get.

He didn't seem to have any qualms at all now that I was back to full health. His dick was hard as stone and lying all plump and delicious on his chiseled abs, making my mouth water.

“Use your words, baby. What do you want?” I purred, crawling over him but not allowing our bodies to touch at all.

“I want you to... touch me.”

“Touch you where?”

“My cock... I want you to touch my cock.”

I looked down between us just as his dick surged. His glossy, fat head brushed against the crotch of my jeans, and he shuddered.

Using my newly healed arm, I *gently* brushed my fingers against his shaft. *Just* enough for him to feel it but not enough to give him any real satisfaction.

“Like this, gorgeous?”

He shook his head. “No, Cal. *More...*” he whimpered. “I need *more.*”

I chuckled, brushing my lips gently against his.

“What do we say?”

“*Please.*”

Fuck. I loved it when he begged.

“Good boy, Ryan,” I purred before sliding down his body, putting my face directly in front of his cock.

“Do you want me to lick it?” I asked, meeting his gaze through his bent legs. His grip on his knees was so tight that his fingertips had turned white.

“Please, I’ll do anything,” he whined, and I smiled.

“Anything?”

He nodded frantically, and my smile widened.

“Tell me you’re beautiful.”

He was much quicker now, with all the practice. He barely hesitated before the words tumbled out of his mouth.

“I’m beautiful,” he repeated, and my cock thumped between my legs in response. Something about hearing him be kind to himself just fucking did it for me.

“Yes, you are, gorgeous boy. You’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. You have *no idea*,” I cooed before rewarding him by sucking his fat, wet tip into my mouth.

“Fuuccckk, fuck, fuck, fuuuccck...” He groaned, rolling his hips in an attempt to shove his cock deeper.

I hollowed out my cheeks and sucked *hard*, loving the way he whimpered and leaked all over my tongue in response.

Wrapping my hand around the base of his dick, I popped off, leisurely stroking him as I licked the tip like it was a lollipop.

“Cal, *fuck... that’s so good*. You make me feel so good.”

“I know, baby,” I cooed before sitting up and pulling my shirt off. “Come here, help me out of these jeans,” I ordered.

He immediately scrambled to do as I said. I watched him unbuckle my pants and slide them down my legs.

Slithering out of them, I pressed him back into the bed, grinding my dick into his as I moved.

“You want me to fuck your tight little hole, don’t you?” I growled, biting and sucking on his ear as I continued to rub my dick against his.

It felt so fucking good. His velvety, hard shaft rubbed against mine and started a slow, burning ache deep in my balls. Soon, I began to feel my own cock leaking for him.

“Yes, Cal. *Yes, please.*”

Reaching for the ever-present bottle of Astroglide on our end table, I kissed him deeply.

He moaned into my mouth, and I sucked on his bottom lip first, then the top, nipping and biting him until he was all swollen, wet, and puffy.

“*Fuck*, you’re so perfect.” I breathed against his lips, and he whimpered into my mouth.

“Get your hole nice and wet for me, gorgeous,” I said, passing him the lube.

I rolled off of him and lay on my back, stroking my cock as I watched him prep himself for me.

He squeezed a line of lube on his fingers, then reached behind himself to apply it to his hole.

“Fuck, Ryan. You look so good touching yourself like that. Look how hard your cock is for me. Does my baby boy want to get fucked?”

“Yes, Callum. *Please.*”

“Mmmm. I think today I want you to ride me,” I said, and his eyes widened. We’d never done it with him on top before, and I saw a flash of insecurity dance across his face.

“Come here, baby. You’re going to do so well. Don’t be shy,” I encouraged him, gesturing for him to straddle me.

“O-okay.” His cheeks were bright red, and I watched him tentatively get into position.

“Lube up my cock. Make it all slippery so you can slide it easily into that tight little hole,” I ordered, leaning back and cradling my hands behind my head so I could enjoy the show.

Ryan bit down on his swollen lip as he rushed to do what he was told.

My little ginger snap. Always so eager to please.

Fuck, I loved him so much.

He squirted out a generous amount of lube, and I shuddered as he used a firm hand to massage it into my dick.

“Mmmm, yeah. That’s it, baby. Get it nice and wet,” I commanded, thrusting my hips up into his hand.

He rolled his thumb over my piercing, coating that with lube too, before turning his adorably wide eyes on me.

“Good job, sweet thing. Now straddle it. I want you to get it in there all by yourself, okay?”

He nodded and scooted up higher, reaching behind himself to guide my cockhead up to his hole. He struggled for a minute, and it took everything for me to keep still and allow him the time he needed to slip the tip in.

He was so fucking *cute*.

A wave of cute aggression rolled through me while I watched him fumble around with my cock. I had to grind my teeth together to keep

myself from slamming his hips down. I wanted to fuck him so hard he would taste my dick in the back of his fucking throat...

Somehow, I managed to restrain myself.

Finally, he managed it, and we both groaned as his tight, greedy hole swallowed the tip of my dick.

"Mmmm... Fuck, yes, baby, you're doing so good." I groaned as he slowly lowered himself down onto me, inch by scorching inch.

He was moving so fucking *slowly* that I thought I might die.

"Baby, fuck, you're so perfect; you're taking me so well," I praised as he whined, holding himself up with two flat palms on my chest.

Sweat began to bead on his brow, and his ass was so hot wrapped around my dick that I thought I might lose my mind.

"This angle is *deep*..." He groaned, and I rested my hands gently on his hips, holding him steady as he worked his way down.

"I know, baby, I know. But you're doing so good for me."

My balls were so tight; they had their own heartbeat.

"Cal... I, I think I'm—"

He tensed, choking my cock with his ass as my piercing dragged across his prostate.

Ryan's eyes grew impossibly large.

He gasped and clenched down even tighter, and then suddenly... he was exploding.

"Cal...I-I-I'm...*coming!*" he cried out in shock, and I felt the first hot spurt of cum hit my chin.

I reached between his legs and wrapped my hand around his cock, kneading his release out of him as he came.

God, he looked so beautiful falling apart on top of me.

"Fuck yes, Ryan. *Good boy.* You're coming *so fucking good* for me. Look at you. You love my cock in your ass so much you couldn't even wait one more second, could you, sweet boy?"

"Mmmm, ughhh, fuckkkkkkk," Ryan moaned, and I started to move, fucking up into him as his dick continued to spasm in my hand.

"You look so good coming for me like that, baby; I'm going to fill this tight ass up as a reward. Do you want that?" I released his cock, which was still erupting with random spurts of cum.

"Yes, Cal! Yes! Fuckmefuckmefuckmeeee!"

I grabbed his hips and slammed up into him, relishing in every shout of pleasure I was able to work out of my man before my own release began to build. The heat started out low and slow, but then it caught and spread like wildfire.

“Baby, I’m gonna come inside you. Tell me you love me, baby,” I ordered, fucking into him faster and faster as my need for release became more and more urgent.

“I love you!” He sobbed. “I love you so *fucking* much!”

“Fuck, Ryan...*I’m coming...I’m fucking coming!*” My voice cracked as I forced him farther down on my cock, fucking him so hard I thought I might split him in two.

But he took each thrust I gave him and begged for more.

He was *everything*.

“*You’re perfect,*” I hissed, grabbing him by the jaw and yanking him down so I could kiss him again. I nipped and sucked on his lips as I floated down from my high, telling him over and over again how much I loved him.

And the beautiful thing was... Every time I told him I loved him, he told me that he loved me too.

EPILOGUE 2



Ryan Walker

Alexa, play: Us - James Bay

“So, what are you going to do with an English major?” I asked Naomi as Vox drove the two of us back to Fairview.

We’d been at the gun range, as was our new Sunday morning tradition. Theo called it ‘*going to church*,’ which Cal found fucking *hilarious*.

Naomi huffed in the back seat, crossing her arms over her chest. She was in another elegant black turtleneck and oversized black jeans.

I was worried her recent change in style had something to do with what happened in that room at Apex, but every time I asked her about it, she brushed me off.

I’d tried multiple times to bring it up with Vox, but he was a fucking vault. He barely even responded to my texts with emojis anymore. Half the time, he just left me on read.

“I don’t know, Ry-guy. Anything I want, I guess. Maybe I’ll be an author or go into journalism.”

Vox glanced at her in the rearview, his silver eyes burning.

“I’m just disappointed you didn’t end up going into mortuary science,” I joked, and she smirked at me, rolling her eyes.

Vox pulled up to Fairview, and I got out of the car, pulling up the front seat to let Naomi out. She surprised me by crawling into the passenger seat next to Vox instead of coming inside.

“I’ll catch you later, Ryan. Vox is taking me to Stephanie’s house.”

“Oh, alright. Later, Gnomes. Text me if you need a ride home after.”

“Will do, Ry-guy!” She gave me a mischievous grin. I frowned at her.

Why was she looking at me like that?

I glanced at Vox, and even he had a small smirk on his face.

He gave me a lazy, backward peace sign and drove off, leaving me feeling confused and suspicious.

Why did I feel like they were in on something and I was about to get punked?

Shaking my head, I jogged up the front steps and scooped up an Amazon package on my way inside.

“Angel, you’ve gotta stop ordering so much shit, you don’t make murder money any—”

The words died in my mouth as I entered the foyer.

There were lilies... *everywhere*.

They were in hundreds of vases on the floor and spilling over every possible surface.

There were bouquets in armchairs, on the desk, and end tables.

They were wrapped in a garland that lined the banister of the grand staircase...

They were just... *everywhere*.

The whole space *smelled* like lilies, and for a moment, I was transported back in time to the day my father and I had made bouquet after bouquet together.

In the middle of all the flowers stood Cal.

He was in the suit he wore when we worked services together, with his hands in his pockets and a soft smile on his face.

“Hey, ginger snap,” he said, his voice low and husky.

My throat closed up, and I dropped the Amazon package, pressing the heels of my palms into my eyes to try to keep myself from crying.

“Wh-what... what’s all this?” I asked, sniffing.

“Come over here, baby.”

I carefully walked through a path on the floor of lilies toward Cal, wiping a tear away as I went.

“Why did you... how? Cal, this is...” I didn’t have words.

How had he done this?

Why had he done this?

My gaze darted into the viewing room to find that the lilies continued in there as well. I wondered if he’d filled the entire house with them.

Knowing him, probably.

Cal didn’t do anything halfway.

I jumped as he slid his warm, tattooed hands into mine, grabbing my attention.

“Ryan...”

I looked up at him, and my heart stopped.

He was gorgeous... so fucking beautiful, and the way he was looking at me...

I choked again, and he cupped my face tenderly.

“Don’t cry, baby.” He swiped his thumb over my cheek and dropped a soft kiss on my lips.

“Why did you do all this?” I asked.

He smiled, and to my absolute fucking astonishment, he got down on one knee.

My hand flew to my mouth, and a wave of emotion rolled through me. I was literally trembling when Cal reached into his pocket and pulled out a black velvet box.

“Because your father is no longer with us, I couldn’t ask him for his blessing,” Cal said, opening the box to show me a simple gold band.

“So I figured this was the closest we could get to having him here with us while I asked you this.”

“Cal...” I was fucking sobbing. I couldn’t help it; my shoulders shook as I tried to keep it together, not wanting to interrupt him when he clearly had something so important to say.

“Ryan, there are a lot of things I regret doing in my life... Before I met you, I was lost.”

His chocolate eyes were swimming with tears as he looked up at me. His pained expression cut me to my core, and it took everything in me not to launch myself into his arms so I could try to kiss his pain away.

“There’s one thing I’ll never regret, though, and that’s forcing my way into your life. Ryan, you make me a better man. You’ve shown me that there’s good in this world and that I have a place here that doesn’t revolve around violence.

“I spent most of my life believing that I was a devil. Some sort of evil demon cursed to bring nothing but pain to this world... And maybe I am, in some ways.” He chuckled at the frantic way I began shaking my head at his words. Making a gentle ‘*shhh*’ sound, he stopped me from interrupting him.

“But you taught me that even the devil is just an angel that fell to the ground.” Tears were streaming down both his cheeks as he fought to get his words out. “You picked me back up and reminded me how to fly, baby.”

He was staring up at me with his heart on his sleeve and stars in his eyes, and I could barely see him through all the tears in mine.

“I escaped that basement when I was ten years old, but I never knew the sun could shine so bright until I met you,” he whispered.

“Callum...” I choked, and he smiled at me, his own eyes swimming. His voice cracked as he continued.

“I regret a lot of things, Ryan, but the thing I regret the most is how long it took me to get to you.” He took my hand and squeezed. “You’ve been waiting for your dark angel, and now that I’m finally here, I never want to leave your side again. I can’t imagine living another day of my life without you, baby. So Ryan Fairview... will you marry me?”

I dropped to my knees, nodding my head frantically before the words even left my mouth.

“Yes.” I sobbed. “Of course, I’ll marry you. Cal, I love you so much it *hurts*.”

He smirked at me, chuckling softly as he took the ring out of its box.

“Good thing you like pain, baby.” He winked, and I choked on a wet laugh.

“Do you have a ring too?” I asked, and he nodded, showing me the engraving on the inside of mine.

In an elegant script, he’d had the word ‘*together*’ carved into the gold.

He slid it onto my finger, and I admired it briefly as he slipped a hand into his pocket to produce his matching band.

“I want to do it!” I demanded, and he chuckled, handing me the ring. I examined the inside, feeling a thrill of elation rush through me to find that his ring said ‘*forever*’ in the same script.

“Together forever,” I whispered.

He swallowed and cleared his throat as he watched me slide his ring onto his finger.

“Together forever,” he repeated. He dropped his hands to my hips and tugged me in close.

“I love you, Ryan Fairview,” he whispered, his lips ghosting across mine. Somehow, I felt his touch everywhere. It was like I was swimming in his scent... his love... just *him*.

“I love you too, Callum Walker,” I replied before catching his lips in mine.

And that was how, in the middle of a sea of lilies, I promised myself to the man who’d taught me that I was enough.

THE END

OceanofPDF.com



OceanofPDF.com

ENDNOTES/ ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



WOOOOHOOOO! Who's cutting onions in here?

Don't know about you but I sobbed during that last Epilogue. Bruh. So stinking cute my heart is melting!

This is going to be equal parts acknowledgements and equal parts me rambling about this book because - out of all my characters - I relate to Cal the most. Writing him was just such a special kind of therapy.

Cal and I have very similar coping mechanisms, we're both a lil (ok a LOT) ADHD and and we both use humor to deflect the scary fee fees lol.

There were a couple scenes here where Cal made me unexpectedly cry, because it just felt like I was looking in a freaking mirror.

But essentially, Cal and Ryan came to me while I was writing Deathtrap.

Before I sat down to write this book, I thought Callum was going to be your typical badass mercenary, who takes no names or prisoners. I assumed Ryan would be the one needing saving and the story would follow a more typical, stalker romance model.

However, Cal set me straight *pretttyyy* quickly.

Almost immediately, in the scene where he's creeping around Ryan's house and shoves his gun into his waistband even though he knows it's not a 'best practice' it became clear to me that Cal was not cut out to be a Mercenary.

He has an inflated sense of competence because Vox has pretty much been following him around making sure he doesn't die his entire life, which is something I relate too on like a CELLULAR level. (Lauren and Diem - I'm lookin at you guys hahahaha honorable mention to Michael as well hahaha.)

You see it throughout the rest of the book in how careless he is chasing Caleb's dad, then again when he's completely manic in Apex, throwing grenades around like confetti.

The man has *zero* finesse (felt) but he's just so lovable and charming, that you kind of look past it.

The more time I spent with Cal, the more it became clear that he was the one that really needed saving.

He's flawed and never had anyone to teach him the difference between right and wrong. He messes up a lot, but you can *see* that he's an inherently kind and gentle soul in how he tends to instinctively work against his training and his triggers.

Joanna is a great example of this. Despite the feelings of jealousy and possessiveness he felt when he first met her, he immediately put that aside when he realized she was mourning the death of a loved one. What I love about Cal is that although he fucks up alot, he has the ability to self reflect and learn from his mistakes. He's not too proud to apologize or make amends when he knows he did something wrong.

Cal genuinely doesn't *want* to hurt people, he just didn't realize that was an option until Ryan.

He'd been left to save himself over and over again. His poor inner child was starving for love, and he needed a safe place to finally rest his head.

He found that with Ryan, and their love story honestly just makes my whole heart tingle.

Speaking of our neurotic little Ginger snap, the death of a father is something Ryan and I share. The trauma that comes from losing a parent is deep and something that follows you to the grave. Although it may seem *insane* that Ryan had this overwhelming fear of over exerting Callum while

he was injured, I can confirm that irrational fear of death is a very real byproduct of losing people close to you at a young age.

I really thought everyone worried their partners/loved ones would die every time they left the house until my therapist told me this isn't normal at all, it's a trauma response to how many people I lost in my formative years.

What works here though, is the fact that Cal and Ryan's collective trauma's complement each other and they're both what the other person needed to heal.

Because of Ryan's fear that he would lose Cal the way he'd lost his father, he played a big role in helping Cal realize that he wasn't meant for a life full of danger and violence. He belonged with Ryan, at Fairview, helping people heal instead of being the reason they needed healing.

Additionally, Cal's complicated and abusive past sets him up to be the *perfect* grief counselor. Anyone who's grown up with narcissists in their lives can likely relate to the insanely complicated feelings that come with separating yourself from a relationship like that.

Whether you're voluntarily going no contact with the individual in question or they pass away, the feelings that come with that are not simple or clean cut. They're often accompanied with feelings of doubt.

Am I overreacting?

Was the abuse really that bad?

Was it even abuse or was it deserved?

Especially in instances where the abuser has passed away, it gets even more complicated because the people around you tend to focus on the good things that person did, so you're at risk of intentionally or unintentionally being gaslit into thinking your feelings aren't valid.

We see this with the little girl who has her outburst at her dad's funeral and is chastised by her mother for speaking her truth.

Only someone like Cal, who fully understands that to lose someone who hurt you can be just as difficult to process as losing someone who loved you, would be able to truly relate to what that young girl was going through.

Anyways, I could go on all day about the themes of trauma, loss and grief in this book, but I'll stop here for now.

As I'm sure you could tell, I have plans for a book following Cass and Theo, (that shitty principal from Ryan's flashback? What did he do to Theo and why was she so scared?) as well as Vox and Naomi (We all know

Naomi's not okay after what happened to her. She didn't have a fashion sense change because of art school. Will Vox be able to help her heal?), so keep an eye out for those!

If you want access to bonus chapters and exclusive content, consider supporting me on patreon! See the next page for details!

OceanofPDF.com

NOW FOR ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



First and foremost, my sister from another mister Alina May. Writing this world with you is a core memory now. I'll never forget the day we decided to do this together and I cannot wait for the next installments. Writing the cross over chapters, plotting together at the Deathtrap launch party, and just the countless back and forth text convos of our characters bantering with each other will always be burned into my brain forever. I love you, bitch, and I'm SO proud of you. The fact that you wrote Make Me while going through what you were going through at the time is incredible and you're one of the strongest, baddest bitches I know.

As always, Lauren and Diem, my best book besties. I can't tell you guys how much you've changed my life and how grateful I am to have you. I love you both so fucking much, I literally can't even put it into words.

Extra big thanks for Lauren for putting her absolute heart and SOUL into the playlist. I literally don't know how you do it, but every song is SO perfect for the vibe. If they ever make this into a movie I want these exact songs for each scene hahaha.

Big thank you to Rhiann, my illustrator. This girl eats my books for breakfast lunch and dinner, and the amount of detail she includes in her art is incredible. So happy to have you as my official illustrator. I adore you and I wish we lived closer so we could geek out over books and color theory together.

I also want to thank Julia McColgan, the author of A Perfect World Series. Julia and I became close over the course of this story, as she was writing *Ruin my Life* at the same time. We were beta reading each other's work and honestly, having another author friend to bounce ideas off of and work out plot points with has been a dream come true. I appreciate you so freaking much! Also, if you're reading this and aren't familiar with Julia's work, check it out, you don't know what you're missing!

Of course, Taylor, my editor and PA - you're fucking amazing and I don't know how I ever functioned before you. Thank you so much for all you do!

Then of course, thank you to my husband, and tartar sauce, for always supporting their bookish egg and keeping me from getting lost in my head <3

OceanofPDF.com

Want more Cal and Ryan?

Support Alex on patreon for bonus chapters, exclusive short stories with your favorite characters from the Alexverse and more!

patreon.com/Alexandrastpierre

OceanofPDF.com

Stay Connected!

Follow Alex on socials

Tiktok/Instagram: @alexandrastpierrebooks

Patreon: patreon.com/Alexandrastpierre

Facebook: [Alex's Lil Psycho's facebook group](#)

YouTube: alexstpierrebooks

[OceanofPDF.com](https://oceanofpdf.com)

ALSO BY ALEXANDRA ST PIERRE

Dark Romantic Fantasy

The Origin's Daughter Series

(Primarily M/F)

Book 1: The Origin's Daughter

Book 2: The Dominion of Sin

Book 3: The Queen's Shadow

Dark Paranormal Romance

The Murder and Mayhem Duet

(M/F, MM, MFM)

Book 1: Deathtrap

Holiday Novelette featuring Shem + Gabe (Available on Patreon)

Book 2: Hellcat (Coming Soon)

Dark Romance

The Silent Hollow Series (Shared world with Alina May)

(MM, MF, FF)

The Mercenary and the Mortician

OceanofPDF.com